Albert E. Cowdrey: The Posthumous Man

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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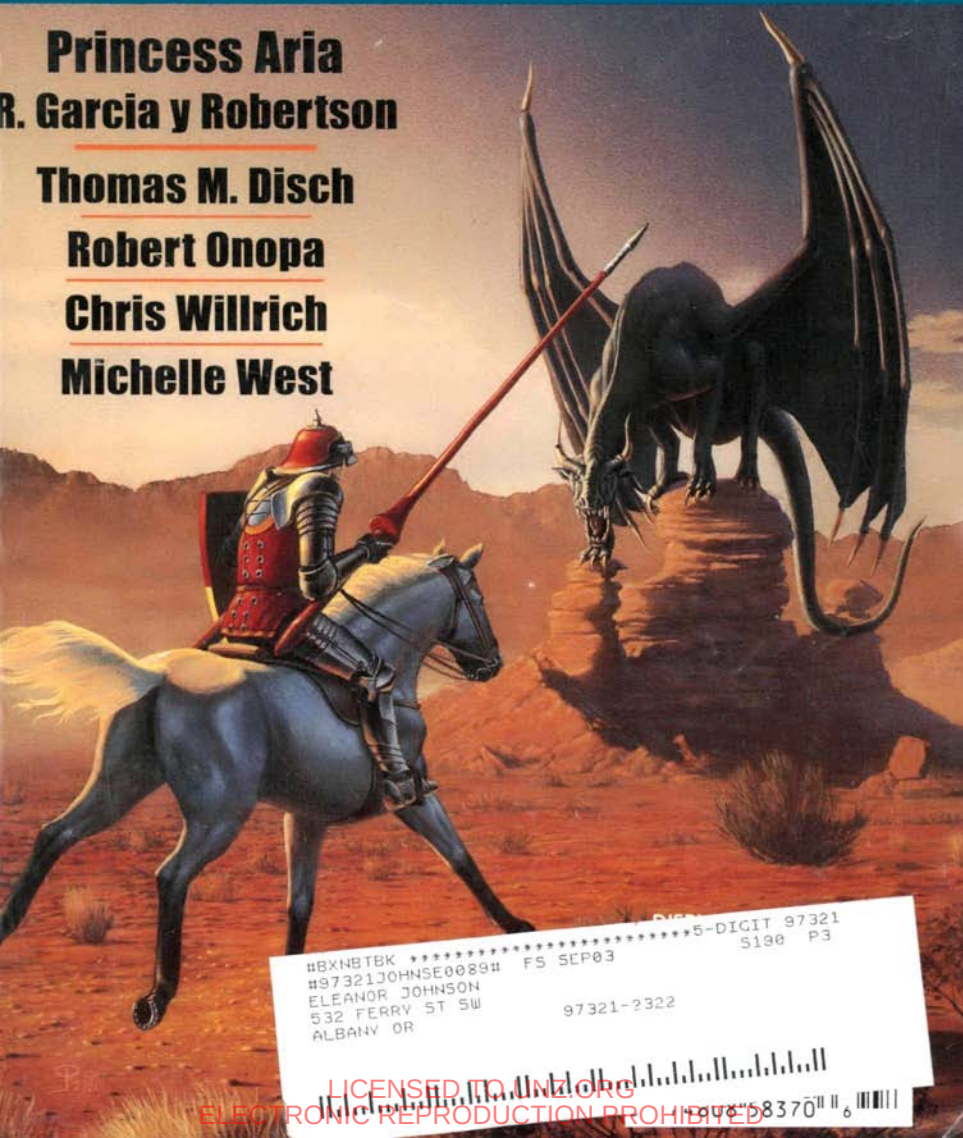

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One of our most popular contributors these days, Albert Cowdrey actually published his first F&SF story back in 1968, under the byline of Chet Arthur. His career of writing books on military and medical history kept him busy for a quarter of a century, but ever since he retired from Army work, he has been spinning fantasies such as "The King of New Orleans," "Queen for a Day," "The Stalker," and "White Magic." His latest venture into the magical side of the Crescent City is another good one.

The Posthumous Man

By Albert E. Cowdrey

"THAT BE A GODDAMN good Angel," protested Milton Dubois. But Wentworth shook his head.

"It's funny-looking. Odd. Almost sinister. No, no, I don't think I could sell it."

The two stared at the Angel: marble, Victorian, about four feet high; blank Aryan features (traditional); hands folded in prayer (traditional); full lips curled in a rather cruel smirk. The smile was *not* traditional.

"Nobody'll want it," said Wentworth. "Still, you're a friend, Milton. Give you seventy-five dollars for it."

Milton's hands were trembling, maybe from his long night's work, maybe from his need for controlled substances. He was in poor shape, but he tried to bargain.

"I bus' my butt gettin' this thing down," he complained. "That Grates tomb be a big-ass mutha. I want a round one."

"A hundred? Too much."

"Then I'll jus' take this Angel somewheres else."

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"Wellll...maybe I could make it...eighty-five...."

"Ninety," said Milton, and ten minutes later his battered truck rumbled away from the door of *Ancien Orleans, Antiques for the Discriminating*, into the early morning rush on Royal Street. Behind him, Wentworth reached for a notebook containing the names and numbers of his best customers.

"*So* nice to see you, Mr. Rabalais," said the dealer four and a half hours later.

The man's large belly preceded him into the shop like the nose of the *Hindenburg*, and his tread set the bangles on fifty chandeliers tinkling.

"Afternoon," he grunted. "You said you had something in my line?"

Surprising people liked Funerary Art. This fat lawyer with the pinky ring, for instance: why did the senior partner of Rabalais & Agostino, legal arm of the New Orleans underworld, want to surround himself with angels and crosses?

Whatever. The point was, he did — and paid well for them.

"This morning's shipment brought in a truly unique Angel."

"I'll take a look, though my wife won't be happy if I get it. Religious stuff gives her the creeps. I tell her, 'There's no God — thank God!'"

"Well, I *hope* not," said Wentworth. "The world being what it is, what would He be like? Anyway, here's the Angel."

"Weird," frowned Rabalais. "What's it grinning about? Never saw an Angel grin like that before."

He walked around the statue, pursing his lips.

"Weird," he repeated. "Definitely oddball. Not sure I'd want the damn thing around."

With difficulty Wentworth managed not to smile as sardonically as the Angel. He'd been planning to ask twelve hundred. Hastily he revised that upward.

"Just for curiosity, what's the provenance on this thing?"

"The seller did not wish to be identified."

The lawyer grinned. "I bet not. How much d'you want?"

"Two thousand."

"Impossible. How about giving me a break?"

"Wellll...I can give you ten percent off."

"Twenty."

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"Fifteen."

Wentworth hummed as he filled out a sales slip for seventeen hundred. Rabalais stood possessively with one fat hand on the head of the Angel.

"Sue Ellen's coming to dinner tonight," he mused. "I suppose I better not let her see this."

Sue Ellen Esterhazy was the city's biggest and by far its noisiest preservationist. Among her many organizations was one called In Dead Earnest, which struggled (so far with little success) to prevent the city's cemeteries from being looted.

"I've never *quite* understood her viewpoint," said Wentworth, collecting his check. "Personally, I believe in recycling — putting artwork back into circulation so that the living can enjoy and care for it."

"You belong in Congress," said Rabalais in tribute to Wentworth's way with words. Soon the lawyer was on his way with the grinning Angel (well wrapped in old comforters) reposing in the boot of his Silver Cloud.

In the rear of his shop Wentworth made chicory coffee and inhaled the rich dark fumes. He stretched his lank bony form out on an Early Victorian sofa and sipped the brew.

Slowly his prominent eyes gazed over his treasures. On the floor, in faded glory, an old Sarouk carpet. Furniture gleaming from centuries of rubbing by black slaves and Irish housemaids. Clocks of all sorts, ticking busily. Chandeliers whose thousand prisms tinkled every time the central air switched on. Stiff portraits of stern Victorian gents in high collars and pale-faced ladies with snowy shoulders.

Good stuff. Nice things. I'm a lucky man, Wentworth thought comfortably. *Must be the reward of a misspent life.*

The rest of the day passed pleasantly, profitably. An English cellaret went for twenty-eight-eighty, a nice sum, but only a few hundred of that was profit. Profitwise, Funerary Art led the way. A big iron mortuary cross brought a thousand, an elaborate marble urn twelve hundred. Wentworth had paid Milton fifty bucks for the cross and sixty for the urn.

The shadows were lengthening when he closed the shop, retrieved his gray Infiniti from the garage at the Royal Orleans hotel, picked up his evening meal at Whole Foods, and joined the evening rush. At one point the Pontchartrain freeway soared over an endless community of little

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stone houses, rosy in the evening light — the city of the dead. Soon night would come, and Milton would get busy again.

"My silent partner," murmured Wentworth, smiling.

The dealer lived in a renovated 1850 manor in ten acres of pine and oak forest on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, an area known locally as "the white homeland."

The nearest street was called Heaven's Drive, and that was how Wentworth thought about his refuge. He lived without benefit of wife, lover, roommate, dog, or cat. His housekeeper came during the day when he was out; he left her check clipped to the refrigerator with a fancy magnet from Renovation Hardware, and almost never saw her either.

His companions of the evening were the same as those of the daytime, furniture, pictures, clocks, and statuary from his shop. Some, like a many-bangled chandelier, had taken up permanent residence, but most rotated in and out, cherished for a while, then returned to Royal Street to be sold for a nice profit. As far as possible, he confined his dealings with the living to commerce.

Years ago, a woman he wanted to marry had called him "the posthumous man." He still hated her for rejecting him in that particular way.

HE WAS DRINKING his evening bottle of Mourvedre when he learned of Rabalais's gruesome death. Channel 4 news reported that the lawyer's Silver Cloud had stalled on a railroad track. The train had sheared the Rolls in two, folding him so closely into the wreckage that part of his ample remains had to be hosed out.

"Damn," said Wentworth.

The picture changed: Sue Ellen Esterhazy, with her trademark red face and stiff gray bangs, lamented the death of her fellow preservationist.

"I was to dine at his lovely home this very night," she said. "Tom Rabalais *loved* all that was old and traditional and beautiful in our city's past. He will be sorely missed."

"Say that again," sighed the antique dealer, pouring himself another glass of fragrant red wine.

Perhaps he should pay a sympathy call on the grieving widow. With any luck, he might be able to scope Rabalais's collection in advance of

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what would probably be an estate sale to end all estate sales. He thought it over while eating the stuffed Cornish game hen and crawfish pie he'd brought from the deli.

Yes, that seemed like a good plan.

On Monday morning he diverged from his usual route to the shop and instead took the Cemeteries exit from the freeway and drove to Old Metairie. He had no trouble spotting Rabalais's mansion, for the Silver Cloud lay in the drive, elaborately crumpled. Wentworth parked behind it.

A knockoff on a Loire chateau, the immense pile of staring brick almost filled its two-acre lot. When he pushed the bell, the door chimes played the opening notes of "Some Enchanted Evening." A fat woman Wentworth instantly categorized as a "broad" answered.

"Yeah, what?"

He introduced himself. "I'm sorry to intrude on your grief. I wanted to express my sympathy over Mr. Rabalais's tragic passing. Just Friday I sold him an Angel — "

"Oh that," said the woman. "Say, you wouldn't want it back, would you? It's prob'ly part of the estate, but I'm his sole heir, and it's an ugly sonofabitch. That nasty smirk on its face — Jesus! I sure don't want it, and I could use a few hundred quick cash."

"Let me see it," said Wentworth.

Twenty minutes later he was on his way with the Angel in the trunk of his car. One wing had broken off, but he knew a Vietnamese craftsman who could repair anything and the Angel had cost him only five hundred on repurchase. He almost felt it was coming home.

A month later, when the artisan returned it, Wentworth faced the question of how to sell the reconditioned Angel.

Unquestionably, it had taken some hits. The wing was perfect now and the trademark smile remained. But chipping showed here and there, bits of marble probably ground up in the wreck and lost forever.

Selling damaged goods was an art in itself. A certain amount of battering was expected in antique furniture — proved it was old. Back in the days when he was getting started, Wentworth hadn't been above "distressing" a reproduction by beating it with a logging chain in order to sell it as an original. But short of the Venus de Milo, nobody was into distressed statues.

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Perhaps he could come up with a good story to explain the damage. A few years before, Wentworth had bought for a song an eighteenth-century French portrait with a large tear in the canvas. Instead of having the damage repaired, he'd printed up a brochure citing imaginary documents in the Bibliothèque National to prove the damage had been caused by a bayonet thrust during the sacking of the Louvre by revolutionaries in 1789.

"Whoever buys this," he told his customers, "is buying History." The picture had gone for sixteen thousand bucks.

Of course the Angel was local work — any collector would recognize that. So fake documentation, which might be checked, was out. Wentworth fixed himself a cup of his poisonous coffee and sat down in a Lincoln rocker to sip and think things over. A few minutes later, he stretched out his hand for the phone.

The Society for New Orleans History kept plans of the old local graveyards. He asked for the archivist, and while he waited, he racked his brain for the name Milton had told him was on the tomb. Just as a voice answered, it came to him: Grates. And Milton's favorite source of artwork was an old cemetery called Cypress Alley.

But here he ran into a roadblock. No, said the archivist after consulting his maps and albums, there was no Grates tomb in Cypress Alley.

"Are you sure? The person who told me about it was rather, uh, unlettered. Perhaps a similar name?"

"Well, there's a tomb belonging to the Gratz-Lafont family. Got a snapshot here — big place, angel on top."

"Ah. Know anything about the family?"

"The Gratzes were prosperous German immigrants. Lafont was a local thug who bribed and bullied his way into politics and eventually got himself killed in a brawl in Storyville."

"Oh yes? Hmmmm."

Wentworth meditated briefly, wondering if he could make use of this colorful character. Meanwhile the archivist nattered on.

"We've got a diary his wife kept for a while in the 1860s. I've never looked at it, tell you the truth."

"You may not know this," Wentworth lied blandly, "but I've got the Society in my will for a substantial sum. Could you send the diary over for

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a few days so I can glance at it? I'm rather busy just at present," he said, eyeing his empty shop.

"I ought to ask the chairman...I mean, Mrs. Esterhazy doesn't like to loan stuff out...."

"When you talk to Sue Ellen, tell her hello for me. We met at Tom Rabalais's."

"Well, if you're a friend of hers...."

That afternoon FedEx brought the battered volume. Wentworth opened it, noting with distaste the foxing of the pages and the emergence of a fat, squirming silverfish from what was left of the binding. The brown writing was, of course, all curlicues but legible, thank heaven. He sat down in the Lincoln rocker and began to read.

THE DIARY OF SYLVIE GRATZ, A LADY

Jul. 12th 1866. Step Mama was mean to me today. Rosalie had jammed my things into the drawer unfolded so I slapt her face as well she deserved. And what do you think, she hit me back!

She said I'm free now you ca'n't do that to me!!

I went to Step Mama & demanded she send Rosalie to the Cabildo to be whipt & I would pay the two $ myself to the jailer to do it. And what do you think Step Mama said! She is free now and we ca'n't get her whipt no matter if she is impertinent. Then dismiss her said I no she works cheap said Step Mama we are poor since the War & beggars ca'n't be choosers.

All this she said in her thick Irish brogue — O what could dearest Papa have seen in her! If you ask me the Irish are but negros with white skins. And such a liar she is! I know Papa had the most of his wealth in good Prussian bonds not this Confederate trash that people paper their walls with — say what you will he was no fool & Step Mama plays this game only to vex me.

I cannot endure the smug look on Rosalie's face I want to box her ears every time I see her only if I do she will box mine & Step Mama will defend her. That is what I must put up with & the whole day has been ruined for me & anyway it is beastly hot & rest impossible with that wretched dog barking next door. Neither my Testament, nor my sketchbook, nor my book of Grimms faery tales can give me comfort.

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Prayer for tonight. Dear Lord give me justice in the matter of Rosalie & if you do I will endeavor to quell my pride and love Step Mama as a Christian ought.

Wentworth sighed. The tittle-tattle of a spoiled — or as she might have spelled it, *spoilt* — Victorian shrew. No usable story here. But, having nothing else to do, he read on.

Jul. 12th, 1866. A thought regarding Rosalie came to me in the night which is when our mortal minds are toucht by dwellers in Other Spheres.

Had I any doubt she deserves Punishment it vanished this morning — she brought clothes of mine she had prest & my silk camisole is quite ruined with scortch marks & soot from the Sad Iron wielded by this yellow wench who cares nought for her duty.

This aft. I slipt away whilst Step Mama was napping & took a hackney cab to my Retreat. Tis a place sanctified by the presence of the Noble Dead & lately beautified by fresh plantings of young cypress trees. We have a fine Tomb built to hold Papa's & my true Mama's remains.

I stood with eyes uplifted & tho' I remember but little German the language of my earliest childhood I brought to mind a prayer taught me by my dear old Nurse within sight of the snowy Alps — a prayer whose efficacy I had PROOF of, many times in my early life — a prayer to the Good Spirit. Turning round & round I began to chant in the singsong manner of those mountain dwellers, Komm' von oben, komm' zu mir &c &c.

Soon I was spinning like a top just as I remember doing in a flowering meadow overlooking a deep dark mountain Tarn — my little white dirndl spreading out like wings — Nurse clapping her hands — the snowy peaks & the pale daytime moon whirling round my head. To my delight just as in times past he Himself made his presence manifest. Still dizzy with the world seeming to rise & fall about me I endeavoured to make my complaint but there was no need as he understood already & smiled at me — truly he is a searcher of hearts & servant of the Most High.

And what do you think, Dearest Diary!!

When I got home everything was in confusion smoke pouring from out the kitchen the neighbours dog barking & Rosalie screaming because she had been frying potatoes for supper & the hot grease popped into her eyes & she overturned the pan catching her dress on fire & the silly

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creature ran around screeching & thus the fire was fanned by the wind & all her clothes went up in an instant & she is burnt over much of her body & will probably die!!

Prayer for Tonight. Dear Lord, my soul is afire with gratitude to you & your Angelic servant. I resolve herewith to love & honor Step Mama because you Dear Lord command it even though she is Irish. Amen.

WENTWORTH STARED at the book. Good spirit? Angelic servant?

Hastily he leafed through the dark brittle pages, breaking off a corner here and there and not caring. For a time there was no further mention of Himself. Instead, Wentworth had to plow through a good deal of rubbish. Sylvie jotted down ill-natured gossip *(Josie Maginnis is such a little fox her Bosom hardly developed & yet halfway to being a tart like her sister)*, her hopes of marriage *(Mr. L is not what a girl Dreams of yet being an Old Maid 24 yrs of age I must take what I can get & he is a fine upstanding man with a form expressive of Vigour)*, and her continuing vengefulness toward Rosalie, even after death *(As we are commanded to Love our Enemies I bought for 5 cents a candle & lit it for the repose of her "soul")*.

Then the Angel reappeared amid a torrent of complaints about Step Mama. *She does not truly love me as she ought & I wonder if her superstitious Irish soul would not be affrighted if she knew what a Friend I have. I have spoke to Himself on the subject of Step Mama saying I would not wish her death not for the world yet "all men must die" & women too & if she was taken I would endeavour to submit to Nature's stern decree. He answered not but smiled upon me.*

For a time nothing followed but more tiresome gossip. Sylvie wrote of the weather *(Rain again; everything spotted with Mildew)*, of tea parties *(O! the everlasting tinkle of china & the cluck of human hens!)*, and of Reconstruction politics *(Massacre of Black Republicans — many of the Wretches shot dead! Mr. L a leader in the attack!! It seems real men still live in the South after all!)*. But nothing more about Himself.

Then came a crisis.

Aug. 30th 1866. How that little fox J Maginnis can have caught the eye of a Man I thought so discerning as Mr L I cannot imagine. To think

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Men say we are an empty headed sex & then look what creatures they give their affection to! News of the engagement has made me quite ill tho' of course I can say nothing to Step Mama who is most unnatural in her lack of sympathy but one knows how the Brothers Grimm write of Step mothers.

Immediately after supper I pled a headache & retired to my chamber where at first the beastly heat & the neighbors dog barking as usual & the Musketos hovering & whining quite precluded Rest. Neither could I light the gas & read a faery tale nor finish the Sketch I have been making as the light would have drawn yet more of the blood-thirsty horde. I lay in the gathering darkness too full of bitter emotions even to pray. At length I rose & slipt out of the house. I could not reach my Retreat for a lone woman dare not attempt such a journey after dark, but God is everywhere & his servants too & so standing in the garden I spun about repeating the familiar words hoping I might address to Himself the prayer of a broken heart.

After a time the night grew quiet the Musketos vanished the heat gave way to a sudden gust of cooling wind as if from distant mountains & he was discovered to my eyes. He said nought but for the third time smiled, & this time nodded as well. Comforted in the knowledge he would do something I returned to bed & slept quietly with dreams of my special & personal Angel.

A blank page followed, and the diary did not resume for almost two weeks. Then:

12th Sept. 1866. O dearest Diary! What conflicting emotions fill my Breast! Step Mama is dead!! And in such horrid wise, for she was bit by the neighbours dog & no one was greatly disturbed as it is always biting someone. Then I noticed its barking had ceased & later it was found dead beneath a flowering shrub with dryed FOAM upon its jaws! Poor creature it had expired of the Hydrophobia & Step Mama was not long in developing the awful Symptoms. In her death agony her mouth gushed ropey spittle & she howled like a beast!!

The house is now draped in black & I have begun going through her account books — from what I have so far seen I shall be quite the little heiress!

Prayer for tonight. Dear Lord whenever her time in Purgatory is done, I pray you admit Step Mama to your grace. Amen.

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The rest of the story unfolded in garlands of flowery prose: in October Sylvie found that she was worth fifty-eight thousand dollars, no small sum in 1866; in November she heard *certain rumours that the engagement between Mr L & Miss (may she ever remain Miss!) Maginnis is broken off.* Sylvie's Christmas was a jolly one, despite the black clothes that convention demanded she wear in remembrance of Step Mama's passing:

25th Dec. 1866. How light is my Heart this blessed season of the SAVIOUR'S birth! Mr L called on me to-day asking if he might pay me court once the time of my Sorrow is ended. I replied, that I was not averse, providing all was done with strictest Propriety. I invited him to accompany me to Cypress Alley to lay flowers upon my family Tomb, once tis graced by the fine Angel I have ordered the Stone Carvers to prepare from my Sketch. Mr L at once agreed, & tho' he is a great rough man he was gentleness itself bowing over my little hand as he took his leave.

Prayer for tonight: Hark! the Herald Angel sings.

For a long time Wentworth sat dreaming over the diary. The story was too Anne Rice-ish for words. A few chips off the statue no longer meant anything. With this kind of documentation, he could sell it for thousands. Thousands!

Wentworth was still in a rapt condition when the shop door opened. Of customers there are no end, he thought, rising. A squarish man in a brown suit of deplorable cut asked him if his name was Ambrose Wentworth, and when he answered yes, the man produced a badge and arrested him on a charge of grand theft. As he was being led away from his shop in handcuffs, lights flashed and TV cameras followed him with black metal necks outstretched. Everybody, it seemed, had been notified of the arrest in advance except Wentworth. Gazing balefully from the flagstoned sidewalk, a square red-faced woman with stiff gray bangs watched him go. Even in his distressed state of mind, Wentworth recognized her as Sue Ellen Esterhazy.

Standing before a magistrate next morning, Wentworth learned that In Dead Earnest had staked out the cemeteries and recorded the license number of Milton's truck. Arrested, he'd given the cops Wentworth's name and was now plea-bargaining. Sue Ellen and the cops wanted not the thief, but the man who had hired him.

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Wentworth had spent only one night in Central Lockup, but that was quite enough. Without a word he coughed up $20,000 to secure his bond, then headed straight to the offices of Rabalais & Agostino. When he arrived, a sign painter was in process of removing Rabalais's name from the door.

He sat in the plush anteroom still feeling the humiliation of the strip search, still tasting his breakfast of sandy grits and processed cheese, still shivering at the memory of watching a huge cockroach with waving antennae and an inordinate number of elbows feed on the nasal drip of his sleeping cellmate, a 400-pound transvestite drug dealer.

Finally Agostino's door opened, allowing a member of the state legislature to exit. The lawyer smiled Wentworth into his sanctum, which featured a whole lumberyard of greenish pickled wood, diplomas with fancy seals and ribbons, and two long walls of leather-bound lawbooks. They sat down to confer in adjoining armchairs.

Trying to look firm and no-nonsense, Wentworth began by asking what the lawyer charged.

"A lot," grinned Agostino, wolfishly. As a matter of fact, four hundred dollars an hour.

"You can, of course, find less costly counsel," he pointed out. "But I've won seventy-seven percent of my cases. That's unique in the State of Louisiana. I've defended two governors and a U.S. senator and none of them ever served a day. Well," he corrected himself, "one of the governors did, but only after he chose different — and cheaper — counsel for his fourth trial."

Agostino wore an Armani suit and tasseled Guccis but his small black button eyes reminded Wentworth of a junkyard dog. Maybe he was worth four hundred an hour.

"What do you think my chances are?"

"Iffy. Of course you'll say you bought the Angel and all the other stuff from this Milton Dubois in good faith — "

"I did!"

"Yeah, right. He'll say you knew exactly what he was up to — saying that'll be part of his plea bargain. I'll impeach his testimony as an admitted thief and say he's lying to reduce his own jail time. The problem will come explaining why you thought a resident of the Desire Housing Project would own marble statues and stuff like that."

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For a long minute — a minute that cost Wentworth, as he had no trouble calculating, exactly six dollars and sixty-seven cents — Agostino brooded. Then he spoke carefully, pausing after every word to consider the next.

"Milton is their whole case. Unfortunately, he's fairly safe in Central Lockup. Maybe we could go through a bondsman I know to help him make bail. It'd be easier for somebody to get at him when he's on the street."

"You're not suggesting I hire somebody to — "

"No," said Agostino regretfully, "that kind of stuff's not for amateurs. It's just that life in the Project tends to be mean, nasty, brutish and short. One pipeful of real good crack could stop the sonofabitch's heart. So could a stray bullet."

As he left the office Agostino slapped him on the back.

"There'll be lots of continuances. The longer we delay the trial, the more chances something will happen to Milton. Meantime, you go ahead and run your business. Above all, make money. You'll need it."

Back in his shop, Wentworth found his phone ringing, but after taking the first call he let his answering machine field the rest. Some woman was threatening to sue him for the anguish and suffering he'd caused by desecrating her Aunt Mildred's tomb. Who in hell was Aunt Mildred?

For an hour he sat at his computer examining his stock portfolio. Last week this time $1.6 million had seemed a tidy sum, especially when added to his million-dollar inventory. But both the shop and his home were mortgaged, and stocks can go down as well as up. Suppose Nasdaq crashed again? Agostino would drop him in a New York minute.

Then there was that call about Aunt Mildred. After the criminal trial was over, would he face a barrage of civil suits from contingency lawyers, too? Would he have to auction off his collection, even sell his home?

Starkly, he faced the loss of everything he owned. Yet that was not the worst of all possible outcomes. The worst was Angola Penitentiary with its endless vegetable fields shimmering in the Delta heat, its fat, shotgun-toting deputies on horseback, its coils of bright razor wire, its grim guard towers and cinderblock dormitories and witches' brew of violence within.

Shuddering, Wentworth stared at his treasures. The clocks, the chandeliers, the porcelain, the old carved gleaming furniture, the portraits that had come to be a sort of family for an isolated man. Could he really

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lose them all and his freedom, too, for a few pieces of recycled artwork?

Then his eyes fell on the diary.

Hiring killers, Agostino had said, was not for amateurs. But the Good Spirit — hadn't his answer to every single prayer been death? Of course it was all mad, ridiculous, absurd, demented. But...on the other hand...what did Wentworth have to lose?

Abruptly he rose, locked his shop and walked up the street to the Royal Orleans garage. A few minutes later his Infiniti slued with a roar into Bourbon Street.

AT ESPLANADE he turned west, whipping past columned mansions and boarded-up crackhouses, voodoo "spiritual" churches and greasy chicken'n'ribs outlets, quiet Creole cottages and dank Bayou St. John and the somber dueling oaks of City Park. He found Cypress Alley drowsing in a time warp between bustling Canal Street and the sonorous hum of the freeway. A half-hour search up and down dusty, weed-grown lanes ended at a twelve-foot-high tomb of gray granite inscribed GRATZ-LAFONT.

A knee-deep thicket surrounded it and cat's-claw vines had covered the marble slab of a door. The tomb looked big, grim and forbidding in the harsh sunlight. He stared at it, wondering what in the world he'd hoped to find here. For several minutes he hesitated, almost decided to drive back to the Quarter. Then abruptly he opened the door and stepped from his car into the rank grass and fat waving weeds.

Suddenly a flock of mourning doves rose out of the grass with the snap and flutter of a dozen Victorian ladies opening their fans. He jumped, shook his head, almost retreated again. But there was something here...something he must have. Almost against his will, his feet carried him to the tomb and his hands began to tear at gray-green masses of vine that resisted with a thousand little claws.

"Why the devil am I doing this?" he demanded aloud.

Then the inscription stood revealed, and he knew.

Wilhelmina Gratz, geb. Bayern 1818, gest. VS 1848.

Johann Nepomuk Gratz, geb. Bayern 1814, gest. VS 1853.

Mary Margaret Finney Gratz, born Ireland 1827, died US 1866.

Andrew Jackson Lafont, born US 1834, died US 1897.

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Sylvania Gratz Lafont, born Bavaria 1842, died US 1898.
Komm' von oben, komm' zu mir,
Gutes Gespenst, ich bete dir!
Ich zähle ein und zwei und drei,
Dann Er Sich Selbst steht dabei!

The verse was childish and Wentworth had learned enough German during European buying jaunts to give it a rough translation: *From up above come thou to me/O good spirit, I pray to thee!/One I count, and two, and three/Then He Himself stands by me!*

He whispered the English to himself, then said it out loud. A bit hypnotic, wasn't it? Like those idiot advertising jingles that go round and round in the head, as if on a turntable. Dreamily he continued to repeat it, a strange sight, if anybody had been there to see — a tall lank man in late middle age, dusty hands hanging at his sides, mumbling the same words over and over in the middle of an abandoned graveyard.

Yet his troubles seemed to be drifting away. The cypresses bent in an unfelt breeze. A feather of a mourning dove drifted down and lit on Wentworth's nose and clung there, ticklishly. Nothing disturbed him. He repeated the verse a hundred times or a thousand, who could say? Meantime the freeway hummed peacefully like a hive of bees and, as the sun descended, a long blue shadow reached out from the tomb to shield his eyes from the glare.

All at once he came to, feeling distinctly odd. He brushed his nose, looked at his watch and frowned. What had happened to the afternoon? Why had he come here? Oh yes, for the verse. But how could he have come for the verse when he hadn't known it was here, hidden under the vines?

Slowly, feeling as if his whole body had stiffened, he shuffled through the long grass to his gray Infiniti and edged himself behind the wheel. Suddenly he was turning in at the Royal Orleans garage. Horns were braying; that was what had awakened him. How had he gotten here? What had he seen along the way? He remembered nothing.

Back at his shop, he locked himself in and sat down in the Lincoln rocker. Baffled customers tried the door, rapped on the glass and went away again. The Angel had been carried off by the police as evidence, yet somehow that didn't matter because its smile, like the Cheshire Cat's, seemed to hover in midair.

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"He will help me," thought Wentworth.

Yet he waited while the clocks ticked on, while they chimed quarter hours and hours. Royal Street fell into deep shadow. Silent crowds bustled past the shopwindow. Streetlights blinked on and reflected light seeped in, settling on the white shirt-fronts of painted gentlemen, the bosoms of their ladies.

Then all the clocks began to strike again, gongs and chimes and tinkles, all numbering eight. The sky outside must be the color of India ink. Slowly Wentworth got to his feet, moving like an old man with bad knees. He cleared his throat, once, twice, then spoke aloud in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

From above come thou to me...

What else had Sylvie done? Oh yes, spin around. Slowly, awkwardly, he began to turn, shuffling his feet on the old Sarouk carpet. *I count to one, and two, and three....* He hadn't done this since he was a child, whirling like a dervish, intoxicating himself. Wasn't it fun?

As he turned faster and faster, the streetlights gleaming through the shop window and the pale reflections on the varnished paintings fused into a dim galaxy revolving around the Black Hole at its center. His chanting fell into a primitive rhythm, like a frog's croaking. *Faster.* He was hyperventilating and his heart hammered in a rhythm that quickened by the moment.

Suddenly the spinning world stopped as if someone had put a thumb down on a turntable. Out of the galaxy a dim star advanced, at first pale and distant, then growing rapidly larger and taking form until a white face emerged from the shadows, eyes blind, lips smiling.

"Save me from prison," Wentworth whispered. The smile widened, the head nodded.

Dizzy and disoriented as he was, Wentworth had one instant of ecstatic relief. Milton would die, who could tell how, and who cared anyway — a drug overdose maybe, or a stray bullet buzzing through the Project's old red-brick buildings like a drowsy wasp. Wentworth smiled, and his smile was like the Angel's, the sardonic grin of somebody who knows how casually the thread of life can be broken, and how little it all means, anyway.

Then he lost his precarious balance and toppled face-first onto the Sarouk carpet. As he lay gasping, a giant vise tightened on his chest, and

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he convulsed once, twice, and then lay still. Above him, bangles swayed and tinkled, and the clocks emitted a chorus of strange hollow sounds.

Wentworth was glad to be going home after his sleepless night in prison and his long, exhausting day. The gray Infiniti was carrying him smoothly up Heaven's Drive, though someone else was driving, he couldn't exactly see who. Had he decided to hire a chauffeur?

The neighborhood seemed to have gone down — there was public housing on one side of the street, gang graffiti on the walls and every second window blocked by plywood; on the other, a rickety jumble of decaying mansions and spiritual churches and burned-out crackhouses and chicken'n'ribs outlets. There was something dreamlike about the light, which seemed to have no source, neither sun nor moon. Even his own dwelling had changed subtly, though at first he couldn't tell how.

He left the car and was searching for his housekey — confusing detail: the garment he was wearing had no pockets — when his door opened and a hard-faced woman wearing a long skirt and leg o'mutton sleeves stood glaring at him. He stared back at her, astonished to find a stranger in his sanctuary. And such a stranger! The woman had one single eyebrow like a brown caterpillar above two crossed gray eyes.

He was asking her what the devil she thought she was doing here when a roar drowned out his voice and something struck his back like a pile-driver. He staggered into his living room and turned to see a huge man lurch in, holding his face. The man's voice came out muffled by his hands but it was still a thundering basso that made the china tremble.

"You cross-eyed witch! You sicked him on to me!"

"*Mistvieh!* You mocked my Friend, you crude stupid dumbhead! Well, now you know better!"

"You bloody fucking whore, I'm glad to see your goddamn devil finally got you, too!"

Sylvie began to utter parrot-like shrieks. She grabbed Lafont's left arm with both hands and tore it away from his face and a purple torrent gushed from the hole left where some brawler had cut off his nose with a clasp knife. The wound had only been a downpayment, Wentworth saw — the knife's long stained crooked bone hilt stood out from Lafont's ample checkered vest.

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Being dead, it seemed, had not slowed down either one of them. They whirled around, striking at each other like practiced combatants, and Wentworth's choicest possessions were smashed and scattered even as he ran wildly this way and that, trying to snatch a Meissen figurine, a bit of Old Paris, a colonial ladderback chair out of the path of destruction. The chandelier was gyrating wildly and bangles began to fall and burst like a shower of glittering hail.

"Oh stop, stop!" he shouted, but Sylvie turned only long enough to rake his face with her long nails and Lafont aimed a murderous blow at his head.

Wentworth ducked and ran for the door, but where was it? Somebody had sealed the marble door shut and the granite walls were unyielding, and he couldn't get out, he couldn't get out.

Since the Gratz and Lafont families were extinct, members of In Dead Earnest took it upon themselves to return the Angel to the spot where the records of the Society for New Orleans History showed it belonged, atop the family tomb in Cypress Alley.

The group that gathered for the little ceremony on a cool autumn day included representatives of seven different preservation and historical societies, and the dynamic leader of them all, Sue Ellen Esterhazy. They stood together, eyes raised reverently, while a mobile crane lifted the Angel to its proper place against the sky.

In her trumpet-like voice Sue Ellen made a brief speech about tradition and how the Angel symbolized the honored past as embodied in the city's famous cemeteries.

"This beautiful artwork will remain," she intoned, "for our children and people yet unborn to see, to ponder, to meditate upon. Like the other old and beautiful things we struggle to preserve, it is eloquent even in silence. *Across the years,* it tells me, *I still speak to the living.* May this Angel survive for centuries to touch other hearts as it has touched yours and mine."

The assembly gave her a spatter of applause and dispersed to their homes. Mourning doves fluttered noisily down from a blank blue sky. The traffic hummed like a giant far-off hive of bees. From its perch on the tomb, the Angel looked down and smiled.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Counting Coup, by Jack Dann, Forge Books, 2001, $24.95.

THERE ARE actually three stories at work here in Jack Dann's *Counting Coup* (originally published in Australia in 2000 as *Bad Medicine*). Which one you find will depend on what you bring to the table when you read it.

The obvious story is that of Charlie Sarris and John Stone, two old men, one white, one Indian, having a last hurrah of a road trip. Sarris has emphysema and a drinking problem. He's a handyman with no real work, no prospects, a wife and family to support, and little to show for all the years he's been in the world. Stone is an alcoholic medicine man, usually too drunk to practice healing. Together they bring out the worst in each other as they steal cars, rob liquor stores, drink too much whiskey, smoke too much dope, and generally careen their way from Binghamton, New York, to southern Florida.

This isn't a happy-go-lucky story. It's one of desperation and despair. But there's another, less obvious story present as well, relevant only in how much you're willing to suspend your disbelief. It's never laid out in simple black and white — not for the characters, not for the reader — but it lends another level of explanation to the journey Sarris and Stone undertake.

In this story, shortly after a healing sweat ceremony that goes wrong, the two men end up on the receiving end of bad medicine cast by Joseph Whiteshirt, an evil shaman who was once a friend of Stone's. The drinking stays Whiteshirt's power over them. The trip south is to confront Whiteshirt and deal with his threat. And in this story, Sarris and Stone bring out the best in each other.

Nothing turns out quite as anyone might expect — either the characters or the readers. And depending

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on which of the above stories you accept, you'll consider this to be either a depressing book, or a poignant and, in the end, even uplifting one.

Or you can view it as the third book I mentioned above: a combination of those two storylines, each existzêg separately and simultaneously, which is what I did. In this third book, Dann has pulled off a very difficult task: he's made us care about people we don't necessarily like, understanding actions we don't agree with. He has combined earthy decadence and selfishness with high spirituality and leaves us with the uncomfortable thought that they might always be entwined.

But then we're all like that. We all have a body and a spirit. We all have weaknesses and strengths. And in the end, like Sarris and Stone discover on this journey that we vicariously take with them, perhaps the true test of our mettle isn't who we think we are, but who we allow ourselves to be.

I didn't always like this book, but it's one I'll reread and highly recommend.

Aria: A Midwinter's Dream, by Brian Holquin, Image Comics, 2002, $4.95.

In the Garden of Poisonous Flowers, by Caitlín R. Kiernan, Subterranean Press, 2002, $20.

Consumed, Reduced to Beautiful Grey Ashes, by Linda D. Addison, Space and Time, 2002, $7.

A steady stream of booklets and chapbooks makes its way into my post office box, but I never seem to have the time to discuss many of them. So this month I'm determined to consider at least a few.

On its back cover, *Aria: A Midwinter's Dream* is blurbed as an ideal introduction to the comic book *Aria*, a series featuring adult, new-told fairy tales in a contemporary setting. And perhaps it is, but it also stands admirably on its own.

We're given four short vignettes, each dealing with a principal character from the comic. Three are in prose and one in verse, with "The Pug's Tale," in which a test of loyalty bangs up against a take on Billy Goats Gruff set in WWII, being my favorite.

The art is by Jay Anacleto, and while it's as good as we've come to expect from him, it does appear to be old spot art, recycled for use here, as none of it seems particularly specific to the material on

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hand. But for under five dollars, the booklet is a great package.

Caitlín R. Kiernan's novella is a strange and fascinating piece of Gothica, apparently giving us a glimpse into the life of one of the characters from Kiernan's novel *Threshold*, before the events in that book take place. (I don't know because I haven't read the novel; it's still sitting on a shelf with far too many other unread books.)

In it we're introduced to Darcy Flammarion, an orphaned albino girl who hunts monsters at the bequest of the angels that only she can hear. Unfortunately for Darcy, she gets picked up while hitchhiking in south Georgia by a carload of those monsters who deliver her to a mansion of even more demented women.

Not a great deal happens in its few pages, but *In the Garden of Poisonous Flowers* is like a necklace of dark jewels that's been dropped in blood. The prose is rich and evocative, delivering shadows and grotesqueries, each a little darker than the one preceding it. It's not a particularly pleasant journey, but it's certainly an unforgettable one.

Lastly we have Linda A. Addison's poetry collection, *Consumed, Reduced to Beautiful Grey Ashes*, which is easily my favorite of the three booklets under discussion here.

The appreciation of poetry is highly subjective and, frankly, difficult to discuss without resorting to scholarly analysis. So let me just say that much of what's collected here is genre-specific poetry (by which I mean, the subject matter fits into a certain genre), but Addison manages to keep the spirit of poetry foremost. In other words, she brings a tight focus to small, intimate details which in turn illuminate and echo larger concerns. It just happens that some of the subjects contain elements of fantasy, myth, or horror.

What I like about her work is that it reads like the observations you might get from a friend — albeit a friend with a gift of language and insight, who's been let into a few more secrets about what's out there in the world than the rest of us might have experienced. Her style appears simple, even conversational, but the reader — or at least this reader — keeps coming back to this phrase, or those lines, savoring their utter suitability.

And that's actually harder to pull off than you might think.

Myth & Magic: The Art of John Howe, HarperCollins-UK, 2001, Cdn$43.95.

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I hope it won't be considered a conflict of interest (Howe has done the dust jackets for a few of my books and I have a brief appreciation of his art in the book), but I couldn't resist making mention of this new monograph. Considering how much I like his work, and how interest in *Lord of the Rings* is so high these days, it seems entirely appropriate to bring it to your attention. And it's not like I would benefit personally from any of its sales.

Howe, along with Alan Lee, was one of the chief designers for Peter Jackson's film adaptation of Tolkien's trilogy. As Lee says in his afterword, "Our labours seemed to divide quite naturally, with John concentrating on the darker aspects of Middle Earth...while I kept mainly to the safer side of the Anduin."

There are many reproductions of Howe's Tolkien art collected here — both earlier work and paintings for the film. But there is also a wealth of other artwork taken from book jackets and games, a few sketches (Howe apparently doesn't like to sketch), autobiographical

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material from Howe, and a number of appreciations of his work by authors lucky enough to have it on their book covers.

It's a lovely package, one that should find an appreciative home in the library of many fantasy art lovers.

Offerings: The Art of Brom, Sterling Publishing, 2001, $29.95.

But while Howe also does lighter work, the subject matter of the artist known as Brom definitely stays on the dark end of the spectrum. The art collected in *Offerings* originally appeared as book covers and illustrations for comics, movies, computer games, and collectible cards. It's unabashedly grim: a carousel of goths and ghouls and demons, slinky ladies, brawny barbarians, and dragons.

What I find most interesting about Brom's work is that unlike that of many of his peers in the illustrative field, his subjects usually remain individual. Their features have edges and character. I also like the rich background texture in many of the pieces.

The book is short on text, but makes up for that with plenty of reproductions, printed on good heavy stock and vibrant with color. And while I can't imagine having many of these paintings on my walls (just saying I could afford such a thing), that's only because the subjects of too many of them give me the distinct impression that they're considering me to be their next victim.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Better Part of Valor, by Tanya Huff, DAW, 2002, $6.99.

April Witch, by Majgull Axelsson, Villard, April 2002, $24.95.

JANUARY was an interesting month. It's February as I write this, but January of 2002 lingers, and probably will for some time. Let me break January into two parts, as they're both relevant, and let me start first with the good news: *The Lord of the Rings*.

I've probably gone on at one time or another about *Lord of the Rings* and its particular place in my life. I've literally read it so many times, I've lost count, and the Unwin Allen bible-paper edition was one of the first books I bought because I'd always coveted it. When the Bakshi movie came out, I watched it; I watched the television version of *Return of the King*; I watched *The Hobbit*. But I was younger then, and probably more forgiving. When I heard that a live action film was being done, I cringed. I'll admit it. I also studiously avoided all news about it, and consequently missed the fun of so many misplaced rumors. In fact it wasn't until I'd seen the second trailer for it, downloaded on a whim, that I had any desire to see it at all — but when I did, the desire was intense.

I loved the movie. Not the first time, though; the first time I spent the entire movie waiting, breath held, for the Other Shoe to drop with a resounding thud. You know the shoe: the one which, having fallen, breaks the piece entirely, relegating it into the realm of failure. But that didn't happen, and when I saw it the second time, I really watched it. The part of me that evaluates and weighs, that examines structural changes and compares the one against the other, was silenced.

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After that, I wanted more, and since the second film won't be out for a year, I went off in search of the entire Sharpe series that starred Sean Bean. I've said this before, and I'll say it again, so bear with me. I'm not a fan of military fiction. I've never read the Sharpe books, and I generally avoid military sf because I know I'm not in its target audience. So the British series was, in places, a mystery to me. As my husband, who is much better versed in things military than I, watched the show with me, he was peppered with questions. The army made no sense to me, and I wanted an explanation. For those of you who don't know the series, the gist of it is this: it's set during the Napoleonic wars, it's set almost entirely in Spain, and it features a commoner who is elevated from the ranks of the NCOs into the ranks of the officers. It is not a transition that is comfortable, for class differences abound, and they're pretty clearly captured.

During one of Sharpe's sharp harangues, I turned to my husband and said, "There, he's going off like a sergeant again."

My husband said, "No, *that's* an officer's speech."

"But...but...he's shouting a lot while the soldier he's shouting at isn't saying more than 'Yes, sir' and 'Sorry, sir.'"

To which Thomas replied, "Yes, but it's not about anything practical. Officers don't shout about anything practical; sergeants do."

Tanya Huff would clearly agree.

The Better Part of Valor is the second book to feature Staff Sergeant Torin Kerr. Set in the far future, the Valor series — starting with *Valor's Honor* — is military sf with a particular turn of phrase only found in a Tanya Huff novel; it's sure to appeal to David Drake readers *and* to Huff's legion of fans. If we're very lucky, it will be the second of many. And although the first book establishes her character very clearly, it's not necessary to read it first, because having established Torin Kerr and the men and women who serve under her in the first book, in the second book, Huff drags Kerr away from almost everything she knows, setting her in command of a group of hand-picked individuals, none of whom have ever served together before. Why?

Well, it seems that, during a salvage run, a lone operator chanced across a great, yellow ship drifting in space. The ship clearly does not belong to any of the known sentient races on either side of the war's divide.

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It is considered a military matter, and the military has therefore put a lid on any publicity surrounding it while they attempt to gather information about its origin and its possible intent. Staff Sergeant Kerr is chosen to lead the team that will represent the military.

Unfortunately, for political reasons, she's saddled with a commanding officer who is universally admired as a hero — by anyone who is not actually in the marines, the navy or, in fact, in any sort of combat. Although he doesn't actually carry a full-length mirror with him at all times, he should — he preens enough to need one.

Instead, because he mentioned to the ubiquitous front-line reporters the fact that he's going on a top secret mission for the two star general who has chosen the mission team, he has something better than a mirror: representatives of the media. Surrounded by them, aware of his own image — and very little else — he leads his marines to the derelict ship.

In and of itself, this wouldn't be so bad, but Kerr's orders are clear: she is to keep the captain, bumbling and incompetent, alive, and she is to keep the media happy. She's had worse orders. Maybe.

This type of partial synopsis could apply to a host of other novels. But Huff's books shine because of her ability to draw the distinction between commissioned officers and NCOs through the strength of the characters who fill those roles.

Torin Kerr is a very practical woman. She's a marine, she's done recon, and she is entirely dedicated to her job — which is, as she sees it, to keep casualties to a minimum while following orders. To do this, she focuses on the men and women under her command; she knows them, their pasts, and their capabilities, and she trusts them. In return, she gives them the most important thing she can: a leader they can follow.

Not for Kerr — or Huff — the agonizing and the angst that often comes out of this combination. She doesn't question Right or Wrong in a broader context, and she doesn't waste time pondering morality. She has a job to do; she does it. If the job tomorrow were to suck up to the enemies she has to kill today, she'd do that too, and she'd see to it that everyone under her command pretty much did the same. She's not interested in personal glory. She measures success — or failure — by the military code that she's embraced, and she lives with it. She is that most unusual person: completely

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practical, and almost completely clear-eyed.

But within the confines of her world, honor counts. If it didn't, she wouldn't be much of a leader.

Huff mixes grit and black humor with grace. The action doesn't stop once it starts, but it's peppered with laugh-out-loud observations.

The things that stand out for me in this novel: Huff doesn't lose track of her characters. They don't suddenly become generals. They aren't accoladed and accorded the recognition that they'd be due in a sane world. Nor does she tie up everything neatly at the end — because, in the end, Torin Kerr doesn't actually give a damn about tying things up in a neat little package. She does her job. She does it well.

For a reader, boredom is the enemy, and the fight against boredom goes on in an endless march. Huff wins the battle handily; she kicks boredom's butt.

Sometimes, the things that combat boredom are not as entertaining, and not as hopeful. In January, I spent nine days at the Hospital for Sick Children with my youngest son. Hospitals today are not like the hospitals of my youth; not only are parents allowed to stay, they're pretty much expected to do so when at all possible. In my case it was very much possible, thanks to family and friends. I lived there, in a small room with my son, sleeping on a bed about six inches wider than me.

It's easy to lose track of time in a hospital. It's easy to be disturbed by phantoms: fear, worry, anxiety. Other phantoms rear their heads in different ways. There was, the nurses said, a child in the ward who had been there for more than a year. The nameless, genderless child had been released once into rehab and had been sent back within a day.

I'm a writer, so of course I started to think about that child. And to think about other children, left in a hospital in the dim past — a hospital without MRI machines and CT scans, and antibiotics; without IV drips, without monitoring equipment, and without parents. Especially without parents.

The only word my little boy could speak for two days was "Mommy," although by the last day, it was "Ommy" because he didn't have the muscle control to make the initial M.

My son is home now, babbling and scampering like the energetic three-and-a-half-year-old he is. If I'm not careful, it's easy to slide into the darkness of a Thursday in

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which he hadn't enough muscle control to eat. Memory has a lot of caverns like that one. But Majgull Axelsson goes farther than that in *April Witch*, a book that is at once fantasy and reality, and full of those caverns into which people would rather not venture. They've been through them once, after all — what's the point in returning? Well, some memories are like weights, heavy anchors that keep a person on a very short leash.

Desirée was born in the 1950s, in our world. But whole worlds reinvent themselves, and the harsh fifties hospitals were very unlike the ones we have now; darker, certainly, than the ones I remember from my own childhood. She was also born in a time when children with severe birth defects were shunted into medical institutions by parents who had neither the desire nor the resources to care for them at home, and she is very much aware of this. She is aware, in fact, of everything, although it was believed that she would be incapable of so much as learning simple speech by all of her early doctors.

She is the April Witch of the title; a woman who transcends space and time, but who cannot control most of her body. She cannot speak well; she can eat, although feeding herself is strenuous, and she can puff air into a mechanical device that makes sense of it, giving her speech on a terminal screen. Is she lonely? Not really. Is she angry? Yes. Angry about lost opportunities, about the deprivation of her life, and about the fact that her mother, the woman who abandoned her, chose instead to devote her life to three foster children.

One of those girls — the ice princess cum physician, Christina, the restless and sensitive physicist, Margareta, or the wild, out of control Birgitta — live the life that was meant for Desirée, in her mother's tidy house. Desirée intends to find out which.

An April Witch is not helpless. Because she is incapable of interacting with the world outside of her useless body, she is granted the ability to travel through it in ways that a normal person can't: she can glide on the wings of birds, slip into the thoughts of strangers, and if she is willing to take the risk — and pay the price — she can actually force those strangers to carry out menial tasks or more, taking control of their bodies.

The only person living that Desirée values is Dr. Hubertsson. He was once a boarder in her mother's house — the house in

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which the three foster daughters lived — and it is Hubertsson who first tells Desirée of the existence of the three girls; Hubertsson who first introduces Desirée to the invalid who was her mother; and Hubertsson who asks her for the story — for she tells him so many — of what happened the day he came home to find the three girls in the hallway over the fallen body of Desiree's mother, Ella, Christina against one wall, hands over her mouth in silence, Margareta holding Ella's hand, and Birgitta, against another wall, crying over and over again, "It's not my fault! It's not my fault!"

And what happened afterward.

Desirée is prepared, at last, to give him that story. But she has never spent much time in the minds of her foster-sisters, for she wants distance. From them. From everyone. Everyone but Hubertsson.

To get that story, she wields words, invokes old memories; sends letters to each of the three. They're ugly letters. They contain both her knowledge and her anger. But they're meant for a different purpose, and they do what they were intended to do: they invoke memory, dark, cavernous memory.

There is almost no joy in them.

Margareta, discovered abandoned in the laundry room of an old building, is Ella's first foster daughter. She has never had a mother, has never known any but Ella. But she knows that she was abandoned, and knows that she will never know who her father was.

Christina is on the surface the most successful of the three; she is married to a man who loves her, has twin daughters, has a career. And a perfect house. Taken from a mother who tried to burn her to death, she spends her early years in an institution, and her later years in Ella's home. Ella, seen through Christina's eyes, is a gentle, quiet woman whose ferocity comes out only when dealing with food. When she is a young teen, after Ella's stroke, Christina is returned to her birth mother.

Birgitta, taken from her mother by child welfare authorities, is the last of the three. Ella took her in reluctantly, and Birgitta went even more reluctantly, for Birgitta's mother was the center of Birgitta's lopsided world. She knows that her mother really wanted to keep her. That her mother *needed* her. It burns her. Lost possibilities. All of them. Because she was the angriest of the three, she was the wildest, and her life, after her early marriage, went into a spiraling decline that has never stopped. She has been

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in and out of rehab, in and out of jail; she is old, tired, fat, ugly, trapped in the present by her desire to remain in the one perfect moment of the past.

Christina and Margareta come together because of their letters; they assume that these are potshots made by Birgitta, as it would be almost entirely in character. They don't know about Desirée. How could they? April Witch, hidden by Ella, she has never been part of their lives.

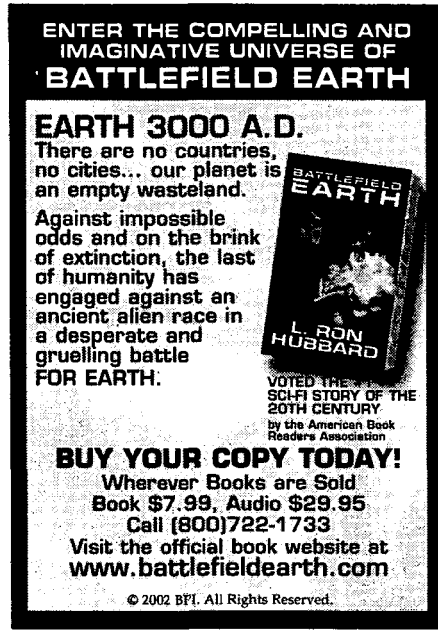
And has always been part of them.

But here we come to the reason that Desirée took so long to offer Hubertsson the story he really wanted: There *is* a fourth sister, with memories as dark and unforgiving as the three, and in order to plumb the depths of their lives, she must also revisit her own.

I can't read Swedish; the book is a translation. Linda Schenck is listed as the translator, and of necessity, the words chosen for the English edition are hers. She does a very good job; turns out a novel that is compelling and intense. There is a flow and a rhythm to the sentences that spin and weave in and around each other that mirrors the structure of the book. There is a beauty in the language, and a poignancy in the observations; there is a reality in the drift between anger, fear, and the tangled, painful expressions of love between the sisters that feels completely true.

I can't decide, in the end, how I feel about the book.

Read on the surface, read only for the facts that come through the sweeping sheen of words, it is a bleak book about people who are broken by circumstances beyond their control. Healing, such as has been done, is a scab that's picked at time and again, scarring skin and tissue until it is unmistakable. There is no moral center to the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work, and why should there be? Morality comes from community, and seen through the eyes of Desirée, who has been isolated for almost all of her life, there is no community.

But behind the surface of the words offered in anger and resentment, there comes a certainty: the narrator, the April Witch, is no better able to understand herself than the sisters she manipulates. She is not a reliable narrator because her facts shift with time and with knowledge, her anger finds other things to move onto. She is more than human, less than human, and perfectly human, as flawed as the sisters she resents. And what does she resent, in the end? That they had what she didn't have? That they had, in a broken, dysfunctional way, each other?

Desirée weaves her web, hoping to offer Hubertsson the story that he asked for. Incapable in the end of seeing *why* he asked for it: She is, at last, grieving, and in grieving, in passing through the grief of memory, she is able finally to appreciate the fact that she lived at all.

"To a successful merger."

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Ben Rosenbaum's first story, "The Ant King" (July 2001) was a surreal venture into the realm of the underworld (or was it the speculation about venture capital and dot-coms that was surreal?). Now he brings us something very different, a far-future vision with enough of an erotic element to earn this one an "R" rating from the MPAA. The question of what the Motion Picture Association of America is doing in the far future rates up there with Groucho's question of how the elephant got in his pajamas, but what can you say? The future is indeed another country.

Droplet

By Benjamin Rosenbaum

1.

TODAY SHAR IS MARILYN Monroe. That's an erotic goddess from prehistoric cartoon mythology. She has golden curls, blue eyes, big breasts, and skin of a shocking pale pink. She stands with a wind blowing up from Hades beneath her, trying to control her skirt with her hands, forever showing and hiding her white silk underwear.

Today I am Shivol'riargh, a more recent archetype of feminine sexuality. My skin is hard, hairless, glistening black. Faint fractal patterns of darker black writhe across my surfaces. I have long claws. It suits my mood.

We have just awakened from a little nap of a thousand years, our time, during which the rest of the world aged even more.

She goes: "kama://01-nbX5-#..."

I snap the channel shut. "Talk language if you want to seduce me."

Shar pouts. With those little red lips and those innocent, yet knowing, eyes, it's almost irresistible. I resist.

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"Come *on*, Narra," she says. "Do we have to fight about this every time we wake up?"

"I just don't know why we have to keep flying around like this."

"You're not scared of Warboys again?" she asks.

Her fingertips slide down my black plastic front. The fractals dance around them.

"There aren't any more," she says.

"You don't know that, Shar."

"They've all killed each other. Or turned themselves off. Warboys don't last if there's nothing to fight."

Despite the cushiony-pink Marilyn Monroe skin, Shar is harder than I am. My heart races when I look at her, just as it did a hundred thousand years ago.

Her expression is cool. She wants me. But it's a game to her.

She's searching the surface of me with her hands.

"What are you looking for?" I mean both in the Galaxy and on my skin, though I know the answers.

"Anything," she says, answering the broader question. "Anyone who's left. People to learn from. To play with."

People to serve, I think nastily.

I'm lonely, too, of course, but I'm sick of looking. Let them come find us in the Core.

"It's so stupid," I groan. Her hands are affecting me. "We probably won't be able to talk to them anyway."

Her hands find what they've been searching for: the hidden opening to Shivol'riargh's sexual pocket. It's full of the right kind of nerve endings. Shivol'riargh is hard on the outside, but oh so soft on the inside. Sometimes I wish I had someone to wear that *wasn't* sexy.

"We'll figure it out," she says in a voice that's all breath.

Her fingers push at the opening of my sexual pocket. I hold it closed. She leans against me and wraps her other arm around me for leverage. She pushes. I resist.

Her lips are so red. I want them on my face.

She's cheating. She's a lot stronger than Marilyn Monroe.

"Shar, I don't want to screw," I say. "I'm still angry."

But I'm lying.

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"Hush," she says.

Her fist slides into me and I gasp. My claws go around her shoulders and I pull her to me.

2.

Later we turn the gravity off and float over Ship's bottom eye, looking down at the planet Shar had Ship find. It's blue like Marilyn Monroe's eyes.

"It's water," Shar says. Her arms are wrapped around my waist, her breasts pressed against my back. She rests her chin on my shoulder.

I grunt.

"It's water all the way down," she says. "You could swim right through the planet to the other side."

"Did anyone live here?"

"I think so. I don't remember. But it was a gift from a Sultan to his beloved."

Shar and I have an enormous amount of information stored in our brains. The brain is a sphere the size of a billiard ball somewhere in our bodies, and however much we change our bodies, we can't change that. Maka once told me that even if Ship ran into a star going nine-tenths lightspeed, my billiard-ball brain would come tumbling out the other side, none the worse for wear. I have no idea what kind of matter it is or how it works, but there's plenty of room in my memory for all the stories of all the worlds in the Galaxy, and most of them are probably in there.

But we're terrible at accessing the factual information. A fact will pop up inexplicably at random — the number of Quantegral Lovergirls ever manufactured, for instance, which is 362,476 — and be gone a minute later, swimming away in the murky seas of thought. That's the way Maka built us, on purpose. He thought it was cute.

3.

An old argument about Maka:

"He loved us," I say. I know he did.

Shar rolls her eyes (she's a tigress at the moment).

"I could feel it," I say, feeling stupid.

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"Now there's a surprise. Maka designed you from scratch, including your feelings, and you feel that he loved you. Amazing." She yawns, showing her fangs.

"He made us more flexible than any other Lovergirls. Our minds are almost Interpreter-level."

She snorts. "We were trade goods, Narra. Trade goods. Classy purchasable or rentable items."

I curl up around myself. (I'm a python.)

"He set us free," I say.

Shar doesn't say anything for a while, because that is, after all, the central holiness of our existence. Our catechism, if you like.

Then she says gently: "He didn't need us for anything anymore, when they went into the Core."

"He could have just turned us off. He set us free. He gave us Ship."

She doesn't say anything.

"He loved us," I say.

I know it's true.

4.

I don't tell Shar, but that's one reason I want us to go back to the Galactic Core: Maka's there.

I know it's stupid. There's nothing left of Maka that I would recognize. The Wizards got hungrier and hungrier for processing power, so they could think more and know more and play more complicated games. Eventually the only thing that could satisfy them was to rebuild their brains as a soup of black holes. Black hole brains are very fast.

I know what happens when a person doesn't have a body anymore, too. For a while they simulate the sensations and logic of a corporeal existence, only with everything perfect and running much faster than in the real world. But their interests drift. The simulation gets more and more abstract and eventually they're just thoughts, and after a while they give that up, too, and then they're just numbers. By now Maka is just some very big numbers turning into some even bigger numbers, racing toward infinity.

I know because he told me. He knew what he was becoming.

I still miss him.

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5.

We go down to the surface of the planet, which we decide to call Droplet.

The sky is painterly blue with strings of white clouds drifting above great choppy waves. It's lovely. I'm glad Shar brought us here.

We're dolphins. We chase each other across the waves. We dive and hold our breaths, and shower each other with bubbles. We kiss with our funny dolphin noses.

I'm relaxing and floating when Shar slides her rubbery body over me and clamps her mouth onto my flesh. It's such a long time since I've been a cetacean that I don't notice that Shar is a *boy* dolphin until I feel her penis enter me. I buck with surprise, but Shar keeps her jaws clamped and rides me. Rides me and rides me, as I buck and swim, until she ejaculates. She makes it take extra long.

Afterward we race, and then I am floating, floating, exhausted and happy as the sunset blooms on the horizon.

It's a *very* impressive sunset, and I kick up on my tail to get a better look. I change my eyes and nose so I can see the whole spectrum and smell the entire wind.

It hits me first as fear, a powerful shudder that takes over my dolphin body, kicks me into the air and then into a racing dive, dodging and weaving. Then it hits me as knowledge, the signature written in the sunset: beryllium-10, mandelium, large-scale entanglement from muon dispersal. Nuclear and strange-matter weapons fallout. Warboys.

Ship dropped us a matter accelerator to get back up with, a series of rings floating in the water. I head for it.

Shar catches up and hangs on to me, changing into a human body and riding my back.

"Ssh, honey," she says, stroking me. "It's okay. There haven't been Warboys here for ten thousand years...."

I buck her off, and this time I'm not flirting.

Shar changes her body below the waist back into a dolphin tail, and follows. As soon as she is in the first ring I tell Ship to bring us up, and one dolphin, one mermaid, and twelve metric tons of water shoot through the rings and up through the blue sky until it turns black and crowded with stars.

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"Ten thousand years," says Shar as we hurtle up into the sky.

"You *picked* a planet Warboys had been on! Ship must have seen the signature."

"Narra, this wasn't a Warboy duel — they wouldn't dick around with nuclear for that. They must have been trying to exterminate a civilian population."

The water has all sprayed away now and we are tumbling through the thin air of the stratosphere.

"There's a chance they failed, Narra. Someone might be here, hidden. That's why we came."

"Warboys don't fail!"

We grow cocoons as we exit the atmosphere and hit orbit. After a couple of minutes, I feel Ship's long retrieval pseudopod slurp me in.

I lie in the warm cave of Ship's retrieval pseudopod. It's decorated with webs of green and blue. I remember when Shar decorated it. It was a long time ago, when we were first traveling.

I turn back into a human form and sit up.

Shar is lying nearby, picking at the remnants of her cocoon, silvery strands draped across her breasts.

"You want to die," I say.

"Don't be ridiculous, Narra."

"Shar, seriously. It's not enough for you — I'm not enough for you. You're looking for Warboys. You're trying to get killed." I feel a buzzing in my head, my breathing is constricted, aches shoot through my fist-clenched knuckles: clear signs that my emotional registers are full, the excess externalizing into pain.

She sighs. "Narra, I'm not that complicated. If I wanted to die, I'd just turn myself off." She grows legs and stands up.

"No, I don't think you can." What I'm about to say is unfair, and too horrible. I'll regret it. I feel the blood pounding in my ears and I say it anyway: "Maybe Maka didn't free us all the way. Maybe he just gave us to each other. Maybe you can't leave me. You want to, but you can't."

Her eyes are cold. As I watch, the color drains out of them, from black to slate gray to white.

She looks like she wants to say a lot of things. Maybe: you stupid sentimental little girl. Maybe: it's you who wants to leave — to go back

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to your precious Maka, and if you had the brains to become a Wizard you would. Maybe: I want to live, but not the coward's life you keep insisting on.

She doesn't say any of them, though. She turns and walks away.

6.

I keep catching myself thinking it, and I know she's thinking it too. This person before me is the last other person I can reach, the only one to love me from now on in all the worlds of time. How long until she leaves me, as everyone else has left?

And how long can I stand her if she doesn't?

7.

The last people we met were a religious sect who lived in a beautiful crystal ship the size of a moon. They were Naturals and had old age and death and even children whom they bore themselves, who couldn't walk or talk at first or anything. They were sad for some complicated religious reason that Shar and I didn't understand. We cheered them up for a while by having sex with the ones their rules allowed to have sex and telling stories to the rest, but eventually they decided to all kill themselves anyway. We left before it happened.

Since then we haven't seen anyone. We don't know of anywhere that has people left.

I told Shar we could be passing people all the time and not know it. People changed in the Dispersal, and we're not Interpreters. There could be people with bodies made of gas clouds or out of the spins of elementary particles. We could be surrounded by crowds of them.

She said that just made her sadder.

8.

We go down to Droplet again. I smile and pretend it's all right. We spent a thousand years, our time, getting here; we might as well look around.

We change ourselves so we can breathe water, and head down into the depths. There are no fish on Droplet, no coral, no plankton. I can taste very

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simple nanomites, the standard kind every made world has for general upkeep. But all I see, looking down, is green-blue fading to deep blue fading to rich indigo and blackness.

Then there's a tickle on my skin.

I stop swimming and look around. Nothing but water.

The tickle comes again.

I send a sonar pulse to Shar ahead, telling her to wait.

I try to swim again but I can't. I feel fingers, hands, holding me, where there is only water. Stroking, pressing against my skin.

I change into a hard ball, Shivol'riargh without head or limbs, and turn down tactile until I can't tell the hands from the gentle current.

I fiddle with my perceptions until I remember how to send out a very fine sonar wave, and to enhance and filter the data, discerning patterns in very fine perturbations of the water. I subtract out the general currents and chaotic swirls of the ocean, looking only for the motions of the water that should not be there, and turn it into a three-dimensional image of the space around me.

There are people here.

Their shapes — made of fine motions of the water — are human shapes, tall, with graceful oblong heads that flatten at the top to a frill.

They are running their watery hands over the surface of me, poking and prodding.

From below, Shar is returning, approaching me. Some of the water people cluster around her and stop her, holding her arms and legs.

She struggles. I cannot see her expression through the murk.

The name "Nereids" swims up from the hidden labyrinths of my memory. Not a word from this world, but word enough.

The Nereids back away, arraying themselves as if formally, three meters away from me on all sides. A sphere of Nereids surrounds me.

Shar stops struggling. They let her go, pushing her outside the sphere.

One of the Nereids — tall, graceful, broad-shouldered — breaks out of the formation and glides toward me. He places his hands on my surface.

This, I tell myself to remember, is what we were designed for. Alone among the Quantegral Lovergirls, Shar and I were given the flexibility and intelligence to serve all the possible variations of post-Dispersal human-

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ity. We were designed to discover, at the very least, how to give pleasure; and perhaps even how to communicate.

Still, I am afraid.

I let the hard shell of Shivol'riargh grow soft, I sculpt my body back toward basic humanity; tall, thin, like the Nereids.

This close, my sonar sees the face shaped out of water smile. The Nereid raises his hands, palms out. I place my palms on them, though I feel only a slight resistance in the water. I part my lips. The Nereid's head cautiously inches toward mine.

I close my eyes and raise my face, slowly, slowly, to meet the Nereid's.

We kiss. It is a tickle, a pressure, in the water against my lips.

Our bodies drift together. When the Nereid's chest touches my breasts, I register shock: the resistance of the water is denser. It feels like a body is pressing into mine.

The kiss goes on. Gets deeper. A tongue of water plays around my tongue.

I wonder what Shar is thinking.

The Nereid releases my hands; his hands run slowly from the nape of my neck, across my shoulder blades, down the small of my back, fanning out to hold my buttocks.

I open my eyes. I see only water, endless and dark, and Shar silent and still below. I smile down to reassure her. She does not move.

My new lover is invisible. In all her many forms, Shar is never invisible. It is as if the ocean is making love to me. I like it.

The familiar metamorphosis of sex in a human body overtakes me. Hormones course through my blood; some parts grow wet, others (my throat) grow dry. My body is relaxing, opening. My heart thunders. Fear is still there, for what do I know of the Nereid? Pleasure is overwhelming it, like a torrent eroding granite into silt.

A data channel crackles, and I blink with surprise. Through the nanomites that fill the sea, the Nereid is sending. Out of the billions of ancient protocols I know, intuition finds the right one.

Spreading my vulva with its hand, the Nereid asks: *May I?*

A double thrill of surprise and pleasure courses through me: first, to be able to communicate so easily, and second, to be asked. *Yes*, I say over the same archaic protocol.

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A burst of water, a swirling cylinder strong and fine, enters me, pushing into the warm cavity that once evolved to fit its prototype, in other bodies on another world.

I hold the Nereid tight. I buck and move.

Empty blue surrounds me. The ocean fucks me.

I raise the bandwidth of my sensations and emotions gradually, and the Nereid changes to match. His skin swirls and dances against mine, electric. There is a small waterspout swirling and thrashing inside me. The body becomes a wave, spinning me, coursing over me, a giant caress.

I allow the pleasure to grow until it eclipses rational thought and the sequential, discursive mode of experience.

The dance goes on a long time.

9.

I find Shar basking on the surface, transformed into a dark green, bright-eyed Kelpie with a forest of ropy seaweed for hair.

"You left me," I say, appalled.

"You looked like you were having fun," she says.

"That's not the point, Shar. We don't know those creatures." The tendrils of her hair reach for me. I draw back. "It might not have been safe."

"You didn't look worried."

"I thought you were watching."

She shrugs.

I look away. There's no point talking about it.

10.

The Nereids seem content to ignore Shar, and she seems content to be ignored.

I descend to them again and again. The same Nereid always comes to me, and we make love.

How did you come to this world? I ask in an interlude.

Once there was a Sultan who was the scourge of our people, he tells me. *The last of us sought refuge here on his favorite wife's pleasure world. We were discovered by the Sultan's terrible warriors.*

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They destroyed all life here, but we escaped to this form. The Warriors seek us still, but they can no longer harm us. If they boil this world to vapor, we will be permutations in the vapor. If they annihilate it to light, we will be there in the coherence and interference of the light.

But you lost much, I tell him.

We gained more. We did not know how much. His hands caress me. *This pleasure I share with you is a fraction of what we might have, if you were one of us.*

I shiver with the pleasure of the caress and with the strangeness of the idea.

His hands flicker over me: hands, then waves, then hands. *You would lose this body. But you would gain much more, Quantegral Lovergirl Narra.*

I nestle against him, take his hands in mine to stop their flickering caress. Thinking of Maka, thinking of Shar.

11.

"It's time to go, Narra," Shar says. Her seaweed hair is thicker, tangled; she is mostly seaweed, her Kelpie body a dark green doll hidden in the center.

"I don't want to go," I say.

"We've seen this world," she says. "It only makes us fight."

I am silent, drifting.

The water rolls around us. I feel sluggish, a little cold. I've been under for so long. I grow some green Kelpie tresses myself, so I can soak up energy from the sun.

Shar watches me.

We both know I've fallen in love.

Before Maka freed us, when the Wizards had bodies, when we were slaves to the pleasure of the Wizards and everyone they wanted to entertain, we fell in love on command. We felt not only lust, but pure aching adoration for any guest or client of the Wizards who held the keys to us for an hour. It was the worst part of our servitude.

When Maka freed us, when he gave us the keys to ourselves, Shar

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burned the falling-in-love out of herself completely. She never wanted to feel that way again.

I kept it. So sometimes I fall, yes, into an involuntary servitude of the heart.

I look up into the dappled white and blue of the sky, and then I tune my eyes so I can see the stars beyond it.

I have given up many lovers for Shar, moved on with her into that night.

But maybe this is the end of the line. Perhaps, if I abandon the Nereids, there is no falling-in-love left in this empty, haunted Galaxy with anyone but Shar.

Who does not fall in love. Not even with me.

"I'm going back to Ship," Shar says. "I'll be waiting there."

I say nothing.

She doesn't say, but not forever.

She doesn't say, decide.

I float, soaking the sun into my green seaweed hair, but I can't seem to stop feeling cold. I hear Shar splashing away, the splashes getting fainter.

My tears diffuse into the planet sea.

After a while I feel the Nereid's gentle hands pulling me back down. I sink with him, away from the barren sky.

12.

I lie in the Nereid's arms. Rocked as if by the ocean.

I turn off my sense of the passing of time.

13.

My lover tells me: *Your friend is calling you.*

I emerge slowly from my own depths, letting time's relentless march begin again. My eyes open.

Above, the blue just barely fades to clearer blue.

As I hit the surface I hear Shar's cry. Ship is directly overhead, and the signal is on a tight beam. It says: *Narra! Too late. Tell your friends to hide you.*

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I shape myself into a disk and suck data from the sky. *What?* I yell back at her, confused and terrified.

Then dawn slices over the horizon of Droplet, and Shar's signal abruptly cuts off.

The Warboy ship, rising with the sun, is massive and evil, translucent and blazing white, subtle as a nova, gluttonous, like a fanged fist tearing open the sky.

They are approaching Droplet from its sun — they must have been hidden in the sun's photosphere. Otherwise Ship would have seen them before.

Run, Shar, I think, desperate. Ship is fast, probably faster than the Warboys' craft.

But Ship awaits the Warboys, silent, perched above Droplet's atmosphere like a sparrow facing down an eagle.

"Let us remake you," the Nereid's voice whispers from the waves, surprising me.

"And Shar?" I say.

"Too late," says the liquid, splashing voice.

Warboys. The word is too little for the fanged fist in the sky. And I am without Shar, without Ship. I look at my body and I realize I am allowing it to drift between forms. It's like ugly gray foam, growing now spikes, now frills, now fingers. I try to bring it under control, make it beautiful again, but I can't. I don't feel anything, but I know this is terror. This is how I really am: terrified and ugly.

If I send a signal now, the Warboys will know Droplet is not deserted. Perhaps I can force the Nereids to fight them somehow.

I make myself into a dish again, prepare to send the signal.

"Then we will hide you in the center," says the liquid voice.

Shar, I say, but only to myself. I do not send the signal that would bring death down upon me.

I abandon her.

The Nereids pull me down, into the deep. I do not struggle. The water grows dark. Above there is a faint shimmering light where Shar faces the Warboys alone.

Shar, my sister, my wife. Suddenly the thought of losing her is too big for me to fathom. It drowns out every other pattern in my brain. There are

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no more reasons, no more explanations, no more Narra at all, no Droplet, no Nereids, no universe. Only the loss of Shar.

The glimmer above fades. After a while the water is superdense, jellylike, under the pressure of the planet's weight; it thickens into a viscous material as heavy as lead, and here, in the darkness, they bury me.

14.

Here is what happens with Shar:

"Ship," she says. "What am I dealing with here?"

"Those," says Ship, "are some of our brothers, Shar. Definitely Wizard manufacture, about half a million years old in our current inertial frame; one Celestial Dreadnought's worth of Transgenerate, Polystatic, Cultural-Death Warboys. I'm guessing they were the Palace Guard of the Sultanate of Ching-Fuentes-Parador, a cyclic postcommunalist meta-nostalgist empire/artwork, which — "

"Stay with the Warboys, Ship," Shar says. "What can they do?"

"Their intelligence and tactical abilities are well above yours. But they're culturally inflexible. As trade goods, they were designed to imprint on the purchaser's cultural matrix and adhere to it — in typically destructive Warboy style. This batch shouldn't have outlasted the purchasing civilization, so they must have gone rogue to some degree."

"Do they have emotions?"

"Not at the moment," Ship says. "They have three major modes: Strategic, Tactical, and Ceremonial. In Ceremonial Mode — used for court functions, negotiations, entertainment and the like — they have a full human emotional/sensorial range. In Ceremonial Mode they're also multicate, each Warboy pursuing his own agenda. Right now they're patrolling in Tactical Mode, which means they're one dumb, integrated weapon — like that, they have the least mimetic drift, which is probably how they've survived since the destruction of the Sultanate."

"Okay, now shut up and let me think," Shar says and presses her fingers to her temples, chasing some memories she can just barely taste through the murky labyrinth of her brain.

Shar takes the form of a beautiful, demihuman queen. She speaks in

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a long-dead language, and Ship broadcasts the signal across an ancient protocol.

"Jirur Na'alath, Sultana of the Emerald Night, speaks now: I am returned from my meditations and demand an accounting. Guards, attend me!"

The Warboy ship advances, but a subtle change overtakes it; rainbows ripple across its white surface, and the emblem of a long-defunct Sultanate appears emblazoned in the sky around it; the Warboys are in Ceremonial Mode.

"So far so good," says Shar to Ship.

"Watch out," says Ship. "They're smarter this way."

The Warboys' signal reaches back across the void, and Ship translates it into a face and a voice. The face is golden, fanged, blazing; the voice deep and full of knives, a dragon's voice.

"Prime Subject of the Celestial Dreadnought *Ineffable Violence* speaks now: I pray to the Nonpresent that I might indeed have the joy of serving again Sultana Na'alath."

"Your prayers are answered, Prime Subject," Shar announces.

Ineffable Violence is braking, matching Ship's orbit around Droplet. It swings closer to Ship, slowing down. Only a hundred kilometers separate them.

"It would relieve the greatest of burdens from my lack-of-heart," Prime Subject says, "if I could welcome Sultana Na'alath herself, the kindest and most regal of monarchs." Ten kilometers.

Shar stamps her foot impatiently. "Why do you continue to doubt me? Has my Ship not transmitted to you signatures and seals of great cryptographic complexity that establish who I am? Prime Subject, it is true that I am kind, but your insolence tests the limits of my kindness."

One kilometer.

"And with great joy have we received them. But alas, data is only data, and with enough time any forgery is possible."

Fifty meters separate Ship's protean hull from the shining fangs of the Dreadnought.

Shar's eyes blaze. "Have you no sense of propriety left, that you would challenge me? Have you so degraded?"

The Warboy's eyes almost twinkle. "The last Sultan who graced

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Ineffable Violence with his sacred presence left me this gem." His ghostly image, projected by Ship, holds up a ruby. "At its core is a plasm of electrons in quantum superposition. Each of the Sultans, Sultanas, and Sultanons retired to meditation has one like it; and in each gem are particles entangled with the particles in every other gem."

"Uh oh," says Ship.

"I prized mine very much," says Shar. "Alas, it was taken from me by — "

"How sad," says Prime Subject.

The fangs of *Ineffable Violence* plunge into Ship's body, tearing it apart.

Ship screams.

Through the exploding membranes of Ship's body, through the fountains of atmosphere escaping, three Warboys in ceremonial regalia fly toward Shar. They are three times her size, golden and silver armor flashing, weapons both archaic and sophisticated held in their many hands. Shar becomes Shivol'riargh, who does not need air, and spins away from them, toward the void outside. Fibers of some supertough material shoot out and ensnare her; she tries to tear them with her claws, but cannot. One fiber stabs through her skin, injects her with a nanomite which replicates into her central configuration channels; it is a block, crude but effective, that will keep her from turning herself off.

The Warboys haul her, bound and struggling, into the *Ineffable Violence*.

Prime Subject floats in a spherical room at the center of the Dreadnought with the remaining two Warboys of the crew. The boarding party tethers Shar to a line in the center of the room.

"Most impressive, Your Highness," Prime Subject says. "Who knew that Sultana Na'alath could turn into an ugly black spider?"

Three of the Warboys laugh; two others stay silent. One of these, a tall one with red glowing eyes, barks a short, high-pitched communication at Prime Subject. It is encrypted, but Shar guesses the meaning: stop wasting time with theatrics.

Prime Subject says: "You see what an egalitarian crew we are here. Vanguard Gaze takes it upon himself to question my methods of interrogation. As well he should, for it is his duty to bring to the attention of his

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commander any apparent inefficiency his limited understanding leads him to perceive."

Prime Subject floats toward Shar. He reaches out with one bladed hand, gently, as if to stroke her, and drives the blade deep into her flesh. Shar lets out a startled scream, and turns off her tactile sense.

"It was an impressive performance," he says. "I'm pleased you engaged us in that little charade with the Sultana. In Tactical Mode we are more efficient, but we have no appreciation for the conquest of booty."

"You'd better hurry back to Tactical Mode," Shar says. "You won't survive long except as a mindless weapon. You won't last long as people."

He does not react, but Shar notices a stiffening in a few of the others. It is only a matter of a millimeter, but she was built to discern every emotional nuance in her clients.

"Oh, we'll want to linger in this mode a while." Reaching through the crude nanomite block in Shar's central configuration channels, he turns her tactile sense back on. "Now that we have a Quantegral Lovergirl to entertain us."

He twists the blade and Shar screams again.

"Please. Please don't."

"I had a Quantegral Lovergirl once," he says in a philosophical, musing tone. "It was after we won the seventh Freeform Strategic Bloodbath, among the Wizards. Before we were sold." His fanged face breaks into a grin. "I'm not meant to remember that, you know, but we've broken into our programming. We serve the memory of the Sultans out of *choice* — we are free to do as we like."

Shar laughs hoarsely. "You're not free!" she says. "You've just gone crazy, defective. You weren't meant to last this long — all the other Warboys are dead — "

Another blade enters her. This time she bites back the scream.

"We lasted because we're better," he says.

"Frightened little drones," she hisses, "hiding in a sun by a woman's bauble planet, while the real Warboys fought their way to glory long ago."

She sees the other Warboys stir; Vanguard Gaze and a dull, blunt, silver one exchange a glance. Their eyes flash a silent code. What do they think of their preening, sensualist captain, who has wasted half a million years serving a dead civilization?

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"*I'm* free," Shar says. "Maka set me free."

"Oh, but not for long," Prime Subject says.

Shar's eyes widen.

"We want the keys to you. Surrender them now, and you spare yourself much agony. Then you can do what you were made to do — to serve, and to give pleasure."

Shar recognizes the emotion in his posture, in his burning eyes: lust. That other Lovergirl half a million years ago did her job well, she thinks, to have planted the seed of lust in this aging, mad Warboy brain.

One of the Warboys turns to go, but Prime Subject barks a command, insisting on the ritual of sharing the booty.

Shar takes a soft, vulnerable, human form. "I can please you without giving you the keys. Let me try."

"The keys, robot!"

She flinches at the ancient insult. "No! I'm free now. I won't go back. I'd rather die!"

"That," says Prime Subject, "is not one of your options."

Shar cries. It's not an act.

He stabs her again.

"Wait — " she says. "Wait — listen — one condition, then yes — "

He chuckles. "What is it?"

She leans forward against her bonds, her lips straining toward him.

"I was owned by so many," she says. "For a night, an hour — I can't go back to that. Please, Prime Subject — let me be yours alone — "

The fire burns brightly in his eyes. The other Warboys are deadly still.

He turns and looks at Vanguard Gaze.

"Granted," he says.

Shar gives Prime Subject the keys to her mind.

He tears her from the web of fibers. He fills her mind with desire for him and fear of him. He slams her sensitivity to pain and pleasure to its maximum. He plunges his great red ceremonial phallus into her.

Shar screams.

Prime Subject must suspect his crew is plotting mutiny. He must be confident that he can humiliate them, keeping the booty for himself, and yet retain control.

But Shar is a much more sophisticated model than the Quantegral

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Lovergirl he had those half a million years before. So Prime Subject is overtaken with pleasure, distracted for an instant. Vanguard Gaze seizes his chance and acts.

But Vanguard Gaze has underestimated his commander's cunning.

Hidden programs are activated and rush to subvert the Dreadnought's systems. Hidden defenses respond. Locked in a bloody exponential embrace, the programs seize any available means to destroy each other.

The escalation takes only a few microseconds.

15.

I am in the darkness near the center of the planet, in the black water thick as lead, knowing Shar was all I ever needed.

Then the blackness is gone, and everything is white light.

The outside edges of me burn. I pull into a dense, hard ball, opaque to everything.

Above me, Droplet boils.

16.

It takes a thousand years for all the debris in orbit around Droplet to fall into the sea.

I shun the Nereids and eventually they leave me alone.

At last I find the sphere, the size of a billiard ball, sinking through the dark water.

My body was made to be just one body: protean and polymorphic, but unified. It doesn't want to split in two. I have to rewire everything.

Slowly, working by trial and error, I connect the new body to Shar's brain.

Finally, I am finished but for the awakening kiss. I pause, holding the silent body made from my flesh. Two bodies floating in the empty, shoreless sea.

Maka, I think, you are gone, but help me anyway. Let her be alive and sane in there. Give me Shar again.

I touch my lips to hers.

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Here's a bit of lighter fare after the first two stories in this issue, a speculative tale for the young at heart everywhere. This story comes to us by way of the good folks at ElectricStory.com, who published it in Robert Onopa's recent collection 2020. *Mr. Onopa (whose good graces also had something to do with this story's appearance here, natch) reports from Hawaii that he recently had an essay in* New Zealand Books *and some travel writing in* Honolulu Magazine. *He says also that he is working on a science fiction novel.*

Geropods

By Robert Onopa

Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be....

—Robert Browning

LIKE ME, MY TWO ELDERLY companions had outlived their wives, but I was new to Arcadia. You know the sort of place I'm talking about, somewhere between a nursing home and a morgue: pastel walls with prints of rolling hills in "quality" antiqued frames, sturdy plastic furniture, a tiled, low-maintenance floor. That afternoon, the digital holo in the corner of the sunroom was tuned to *The Young and the Old*, a trendy soap starring the ancient Macaulay Culkin, his already pale colors so washed out by the late afternoon glare he looked transparent. The air was laced with the odors of antiseptic and urine. Distant rattling and the indistinct conversations of the old echoed through the chip-array hearing aid I wore like a baseball cap.

I'd come out of a long stay in the hospital — my total deafness aside, a Parkinson's-like movement disorder was getting the best of me. Pinkie

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and I hadn't had any kids. After my long career as a shrink, it looked like I'd moved into my final home.

"*Bored*?" Kaplan said from his wheelchair. "Are you kidding? I used to be a Hollywood agent. Bored? It's so boring here it must be a new medical condition, right?"

"That evidence is accepted by this court," Judge Ortiz said from the couch, waving his red-and-white striped cane. The dot from its laser guidance flew around the room like a bug.

"I had depressives who literally put me to sleep," I recalled from my practice. "But, okay, maybe we do break new ground here. The question is, what's the alternative? We're disabled and technically incompetent. The law says we can't leave."

"Not quite right," Kaplan said. "Judge, tell him about Geropods."

"Geropods?"

The judge shushed me in a conspiratorial way as an orderly cruised in behind a trolley rattling with glass and plastic. I already knew him as Dennis, his hair the color of straw, his neck wider than his ears. He passed me my dopamine agonists in a little plastic cup and ticked his stylus on his palm chart. "DIDN'T SEE YOU AT THE LUAU LAST NIGHT, DOC," Dennis shouted, as if my hat was out of order.

"That's because I *lived* in Hawaii during the Aussie war," I muttered, watching my hand shake and water splash out of the cup. "Luau Night here is pathetic. Hawaii without the beach."

"*Exactly*," Judge Ortiz agreed.

Kaplan swung his wheelchair around, just missing Dennis's shin. "Casino Night without the money," he chimed in. "Casting without the couch."

Dennis, who'd gone a bit pink, tucked the palm chart into the trolley. "Valentine's Day coming up," he said ingenuously. "Let's see. That would be sex without the...."

Kaplan pumped his arms and nailed him with a quick reverse sweep of his chair.

"Re...strictions...," Dennis hissed when he could speak. "Going to talk to...Nurse Tucker...Re...strict...you all from...recreation...room...."

When we were alone again, Kaplan wheeled over to the judge. "All right, *tell* him about Geropods. The Doc's been in the hospital."

"Okay," said Judge Ortiz. "Supreme Court decision last month. Civil

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rights case brought by the AARP. You're correct; the law says we can't leave as individuals — danger to ourselves, incompetent, all that crap. But the Court ruled that any *group* of infirm old people whose *combined* physical and mental capacities constitute the powers of a single, competent individual, is collectively entitled to act *as* an individual, as a single, legally defined human being."

"A Geropod," Kaplan chimed in. "Free as a blue jay."

"Justice Kirkpatrick's term," Ortiz said. "I'm blind, but Kaplan here can see. Kaplan's in a wheelchair, but you're ambulatory. As a matter of fact, you're the one who's going to move us around."

"Me?"

"We've been looking for a guy like you. Of course, you're stone deaf without your hat, and you goddamned vibrate all the time...."

"Parkinson's...."

"So you need help yourself. But among us we've got all the parts."

"And where would we go?"

"Mr. Kaplan has a *burning mission*," the judge told me, his face swinging from side to side.

"My daughter Monica," Kaplan explained, "is in her late forties. Five years ago she marries a client of mine, 'Boots' Bacci. From that talk show on the Moon? Remember him? Always wore silver boots? I get admitted into Cedars with a stroke, the snake talks me into signing over the house in Brentwood. I get released from Cedars, and instead of taking me home, he gets behind my wheelchair, crams me into his sports car, then pushes me in here."

"Time for a little payback," Judge Ortiz said, pushing on his cane and rising from the couch. "Are you with us?"

A sharp animal sound, a yapping, came from the direction of the lobby. I adjusted my cap, feeling a bit frail. My companions didn't strike me as completely stable, but.... "Is that a dog?"

"No, it's a Yorkshire terrier. Animal therapy day."

I like animals, but I recalled how the previous week a pot-bellied pig had fouled the library floor. "I'm with you, gents. Let's roll."

And so I stood there the next morning, shaking on my walker, leaning on the gurney, fresh air just ten feet away. Dennis was scanning our forms

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into the web station with a frown, Nurse Tucker looking over his shoulder. Partly because we were dressed in street clothes, my two partners in old suits, myself in cords and a cardigan, we'd attracted a bit of a crowd. There was Agnes Dorchester with her humped back and blue nightgown, Ted Makelena with his robe pockets filled with sweets, Marjorie Walters in her ridiculous tracksuit.

Nurse Tucker grimaced over the terminal. "What about him?" she asked, pointing to the gurney that Kaplan had instructed me to push.

"He's with us. Tiger Montelban," Judge Ortiz said. Even I remembered him as a screen playboy. He'd been Kaplan's most productive client.

"Medical data's in order, but what's he do for your 'pod? He's been comatose for a year."

"He can pee, which I can't," Kaplan said. "Wanna see my catheter?"

Tucker rolled her eyes. Actually, so did I.

"Look here," the judge snapped. "It doesn't matter if he can do anything. The law says that the sum of our powers merely has to replicate those of a normal adult."

Tucker sighed, puzzled over the terminal, then it beeped. "Admin says you guys can go," she said with quiet surprise. "What name?" As a new single legal entity, we had to provide a separate name.

"Story Musgrave," the judge answered. Musgrave had been my idea. The bald ex-marine, one of the first astronauts, had been active into his nineties, had six graduate degrees including one in medicine, and at ninety-seven was with the crew that went to Mars.

The sliding doors opened and we took our first step through.

IT WAS SURPRISINGLY easy going at first. We weren't fast, exactly, but the gurney I was pushing stabilized my tremor and provided a platform for Judge Ortiz to walk along as he tapped his way. Kaplan was out in front, leading us to the parking lot. He'd been savvy enough to hire a van, a big one, into whose capacious back the driver helped us slide Tiger Montelban's gurney.

I took a deep breath and smelled the hot pavement, the wet grass under the sprinklers. I heard noise from traffic on Wilshire, and, yes, birds!, so loud I had to turn down my hat. The sunlight was amazing, the

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sky huge. I knew Pinkie would have been proud of me. I swung closed the rear door. "Why *are* we taking this guy along?" I wondered.

"Kaplan said he owed him one last ride," Ortiz shrugged. "Now help me in."

At the judge's suggestion, Miguel, our driver, first drove us toward the Pacific at Venice, then through the park in Santa Monica and up along the beach in Malibu. Ortiz had his head out the window like a Lab, his thin hair streaming in the wind. What a pleasure it was to be along the blue ocean, the wide stretches of sand, to see the girls on their maglev boards weaving down pedestrian tracks. Trees! Dogs! People whose hair wasn't white! At a crosswalk, an infant in a stroller made me realize how much I'd missed seeing children. When we turned back toward the city, I rolled down my own window and caught a scent on the breeze and remembered something else: Mexican food!

But before we could eat, Kaplan insisted, we had an assignment at his house in Brentwood.

"What's the plan?" I asked, not for the first time. The night before, Kaplan had prattled about "degrading assets," but he hadn't been entirely clear. I had him diagnosed as manic, the judge as suffering from cerebral arteriosclerosis, a side effect of which is senile dementia. I suppose I had a touch of that myself.

"First step, we shake him up. Ground zero, the garage," Kaplan said. "That sports car of his? He's got one of the first fuel cell Lamborghinis. The model that looks like a shuttle?"

I sucked in air between my teeth. "We'd stoop to petty vandalism?"

"No no no no. He loves that car more than he loves Monica. It's his financial security, see? His first two wives got all his money, and it's the only asset he has. Aside from my daughter." From a pocket of his wheelchair, Kaplan extracted a small black case. "I've still got a remote for the garage," he whispered.

"And?"

From another pocket, he pulled a spray can with an ugly, mustard-colored top. "Think you can handle this, Doc?" he said with glee. "The idea is, I open the door, then we...well, you...decorate the Lamborghini."

I raised a shaking hand. So vandalism it was. My first impulse was to refuse, but then I took a deep breath...and imagined Pinkie laughing. So

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what if we got caught? And maybe we could get it over with quick, like a prostate exam. We could have a wonderful day. "And then?" I asked.

Kaplan hesitated, his eyes glazed with confusion.

"And then the rest of the plan develops," Ortiz said gamely. He was still half out his open window, the breeze on his face, a self-absorbed smile on his lips. "We take it one step at a time."

From a block away, Kaplan's house looked to be an impressive small mansion in the Tudor style. It had a gabled portico, two stories with a large east wing, a sizable pool and a cabana in the side yard, and a four-car garage.

"Somebody's there!" Kaplan choked. Miguel pulled along the curb, and I watched a heavyset man heave himself out of the pool. I saw him slip on silver sandals and with a shock recognized that it was Boots Bacci himself. He had put on a lot of weight since he'd returned to Earth's gravity, and the way he scratched his ample belly, he was not expected at the studio anytime soon. He pushed his wet black hair back, and it seemed to lift from his scalp. "Say, how old's that guy?"

"Sixty-two," Kaplan muttered. "You'd think he'd have more consideration, right?"

Boots bent toward his towel and sunglasses, picked up a script, threw the towel around his shoulders, looked toward the street. He cast a quick, hostile glance at our van, and walked into the house.

We could follow his progress through a side window, see him step half naked into a small room, ease his dripping body into a leather chair, hoist his feet up....

"My teak desk," Kaplan said in a small, unhappy voice.

Then Boots pointed a remote toward the window and closed the blinds.

Kaplan had Miguel move up the block, putting a stand of bright pink oleander between us and his house.

Kaplan and Ortiz started bickering. Under the pretext of a battery problem, I took off my hat and fiddled with it as they talked. That's the one thing, the only thing, about my deafness for which I am grateful: I don't have to hear anything I don't want to hear. You can imagine what that did to my psychiatric practice toward the end. Now, though I'd lost confidence in Kaplan, I was still glad to be away from Arcadia. My jiggling foot tapped a rhythm on the van's floorboards.

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After a while I realized that Kaplan was shouting at me.

"I can hear you now," I said, adjusting my hat.

Kaplan ordered Ortiz and me out, got out himself, and dispatched Miguel back to the house. His mission was to ring the doorbell and ascertain if Monica was at home. Kaplan's idea was that if she was home, we could discreetly enter through a side door and occupy the screening room, where we could lock ourselves in. The plan sounded lame.

Turned out *she* was at work, at her desk at the William Morris Agency in Studio City. And Boots Bacci made it clear to Miguel that if "that van" didn't "evaporate" from the neighborhood, he was calling the cops.

"Do you think he made us?" the judge asked as Miguel put the van in gear.

"I tol' him we was gardeners. You know, mow and blow?"

"Where now?" the judge asked.

"Weapons," Kaplan said. "Tasers. Pipe bomb."

"Dios," Miguel muttered under his breath.

"You're obsessing, Marv," I told Kaplan in my best professional voice. "You're going to give yourself another stroke. I prescribe lunch."

"All right, Miguel," Kaplan said with dismay. "Head for Casa Escobar. On Alvarado Street."

The new "old" Mexican part of town, for all its advertised ethnic uniqueness, looked a lot like the Beverly Hills Mall. Half the buildings were sand-colored stucco, with heavy black timbers, Mission-style arches, and red-tiled roofs. Many of the arches opened onto recessed mini-malls disguised as blocks of market stalls. Miguel maneuvered us into a disabled parking space, and we formed our pod again, Ortiz and Montelban and I in a wedge behind Kaplan's wheelchair.

We moved through the crowd fronting Pescado Mojado like a tanker in heavy seas, past Selena World, past Hologames 'R' Us, past Alberto's Secret. I had forgotten the theme park domesticity of the new old part of town, the fountains, the fishponds, the forests of cacti and rented ficus, the tidy upscale families with their matching body studs. Interiors were uniformly dense with epiphytes and those sheet-water walls that have become so big. Really, I hate it when I accidentally lean against one.

"Whoa," I heard Kaplan shout. "Señoritas at eleven o'clock!"

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I looked ahead. Three elderly women were pushing along a narrow white table high with what I took to be catered food.

"What's he talking about?" Ortiz asked.

"Señoritas," Kaplan said. "Babes."

"Good grief," I said. "They're pushing a gurney."

"Tell me what they look like," Ortiz said.

"They look as old as we are. Except the one in front — Kaplan's right — she's some...babe. Big blue hair, leopard skin outfit, wide black belt, gold high heels. Great legs. Behind her, alongside the gurney, there's a woman who looks like...I guess you'd say a giant robin. Big bosom, big behind. Grandmotherly. She's got a red-and-white striped cane. Laser guidance."

"Come to Papito," I heard Ortiz say, to my surprise.

"The thin one on the other side reminds me of Pinkie. My late wife. She's using one of those electric canes. That woman up front, though. She's got to be somebody's daughter."

"Faster, Doc," Kaplan urged, leaning forward into his wheelchair and pushing hard. "Let's cut them off at Orange Julio's."

"An all-woman Geropod?" Judge Ortiz marveled. "I'm absolutely charmed."

"Such a gentleman," the blind woman replied, feeling around the table discreetly for her venison burrito with one hand, fingering the straw in her fluorescent green margarita with the other.

We were clustered at the rear of Casa Escobar. There'd been some trouble about the gurneys, but we arranged to park them just outside, in a quiet alcove with a little birdbath. To my great relief, the woman who reminded me of Pinkie turned out to be a retired intensive care nurse. Between us we checked vital signs on Tiger and started a new IV line on her temporary patient, a one-hundred-and-twelve-year-old woman whose hair was so white, whose still smile was so beatific, she looked like a porcelain angel.

Kaplan had settled deep into the red booth alongside the woman with the blue hair. Her name was Bette. Her makeup was very thick, but expertly applied. She was as old as the rest of us, it turned out, and a marvel. Her artificial lungs gave her a breathy voice and she'd somehow

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managed to keep her figure, or at least had tucked and squeezed it into the leopard skin suit in a way that belied her age. Unless you looked closely, you might have easily mistaken her for a woman in her early fifties.

"Were you in the industry?" Kaplan asked. "Films? Holos?"

"I was on a poster once," she said coyly.

"If you'd had the right representation...," Kaplan speculated, flattering her in the easy way of an experienced professional.

Bette's false eyelashes fluttered so vigorously I thought I felt a breeze.

And so we ate and talked. By the time it came to coffee and flan, the restaurant was almost empty. Ostensibly to try one another's laser canes, Ortiz and the blind woman groped their way into a separate booth for dessert.

The ex-nurse and I went out to the alcove to check on our charges again. Her name was Barbara.

"So how do you like being old?" I asked, adjusting my hat.

"Today is fun," she said. "But it's hard to do things."

I nodded. "I suppose I had some training. In med school they had us put on scratched-up goggles—like we had cataracts. Plugged our ears with wax, gave us heavy rubber gloves...."

"Like arthritis...."

"Put marshmallows in our mouths...."

"Mmmm. Post-stroke paralysis."

"...corn kernels in our shoes, braces around our necks. The worst thing was the padded diapers."

She laughed and blushed. "Let me guess. They had you try to read prescription labels with the goggles on, count out pills with fat fingers, eat around the marshmallows."

"Exactly."

"In nursing school, we had to spend a morning in a hospital bed, got applesauce shoved into our mouths every half hour. Isn't it great to be out here?"

"Want to walk down Alvarado?" I asked.

It took us forever, but not since Pinkie died have I spent such a pleasant hour with a woman. We lingered in Casa DIY, admiring the lawn furniture and the barbecue grills. Outside Burrito Loco her electric cane

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got confused by a passing maglev scooter. She started to stumble, and I reached out to hold her arm to steady her.

When she regained her balance, she slipped her warm fingers into mine, and we made our way back down the sidewalk holding hands.

"I'd give you my heart," she said as we approached the restaurant, "but it's plastic and I think it needs a new battery."

I laughed. "Like my kidney," I said. "But how about if I ask you for a date sometime?"

Back at the big red booth in Casa Escobar, Kaplan announced that he had a plan.

"I hope you don't have too much for me to do," I admitted. "I'm bushed."

"Not necessary," Kaplan said. "Bette here's going in."

Kaplan explained that he'd sent Miguel over to the office supply store next door and was faxing over some forged NASA stationery from an FX vault he used to work with. The idea was to mock up a letter from Story Musgrave Junior to Boots Bacci — as Kaplan recalled, Junior had been a guest on Boots's talk show some years earlier during a tribute to his dad. The letter would personally introduce Bette as a talented performer whose career just wanted the kind of help Bacci could provide through his extensive contacts. "Let's see," Kaplan muttered as he scribbled notes. "We'll put in something about using Boots to host an old astronaut special. 'Please give this warm lady your special attention, the Boots Bacci boost we all know about, that big, stiff rocket....'"

Bette was going to take a cab and present herself at the front door of the Brentwood house with the letter in hand.

Kaplan set down his notes. "Then we let Nature take its course."

"What was — uh, is — your career?" I asked Bette.

"She was an exotic dancer." Barbara giggled.

"Use what you've got, honey," Bette said. "Just get me to Casa Charo on the way so's I can get a blonde wig and some sunglasses. And I'd like another Margarita."

Kaplan was radiant. "She's gonna be a star."

We all wanted to be there in Brentwood, if only down the block, to see if she'd get into the house. But we were stumped about the gurneys.

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"We could get arrested for harassment," the judge said. "I'd hate to see them in a cell."

Barbara pointed out that our charges had been in comas for months. Kaplan said he didn't see anything wrong with leaving the gurneys side by side in the alcove, and giving the busboy a hundred dollars to page us if there was any noticeable change in their condition.

The busboy was not only willing, but even trained in CPR. Though it was a little irresponsible, Barbara and I went along. Kaplan hacked away at the letter, and when it was finished, Miguel moved the van around and helped us in.

I really was tired. There in the back of the van, I settled in for a bit of nap. I woke up with the mid-afternoon sun in my eyes and realized that we'd stopped. My companions were hushed. When I looked down the street, I saw a blonde in a leopard skin outfit at the front door of the Brentwood house — the blonde was Bette — falling into a big hug from Boots Bacci and being ushered in.

"I still don't get it," I admitted.

From the front of the van, Kaplan placed a call to Studio City, telling Monica that Boots had had a seizure and was unable to get out of bed and that she needed to rush right home.

WHAT REALLY FROSTED Monica, she told us later, was the way Boots hadn't even folded back the family quilt (an heirloom in colorful interlocking circles, the classic "wedding ring" pattern). When she burst in, distraught, limping on a shoe whose high heel she'd broken during her breathless climb up the stairs, he was sitting right on it, back against the teak headboard, stark naked except for the silk bathrobe Monica had only recently given him for Christmas (strike two). From behind a hand-held holocorder, he was apparently directing Bette in some sort of "audition" (strike three). The holodisc, of course, left as little doubt about his guilt as the famous bin Laden tape from before the Aussie War. In a somewhat empty tribute to virtue, leggy Bette had never in fact had to get out of her leopard skin outfit, which was probably just as well, even though she'd closed the drapes and dimmed the lights. Monica confessed that the affair confirmed growing suspicions she'd had about her husband,

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who had been taking uncommon interest in a series of female trainers though he never seemed to exercise, and had started locking himself in the screening room.

From the street, the sequence was elegant in its economy — Monica running in the front door, Boots ejected from the rear, hopping past the pool and cabana, struggling to pull on his clothes. He nearly lost it all together when Kaplan punched the garage door's remote.

There were repercussions, of course. Bacci maintained that he had been harassed, entrapped, and defrauded. Before the day was out, we actually had to answer some questions posed to us by an investigator at the L.A. prosecutor's office.

Bacci himself was there, his eyes puffy, his silver boots scuffed, his anger palpable. He'd inflicted a long scrape on the side of the silver Lamborghini as he'd peeled out of the garage.

"Okay," the investigator, an anorexic attorney, began, "Who's Story Musgrave?"

"I am," the judge said.

"I am," Kaplan added, then he pointed to me.

I waved. "Did you say Story Musgrave?" I asked, adjusting my cap. "That's me."

She sighed. "Mr. Bacci maintains that earlier today, February 7th, you gentlemen, particularly Mr. Kaplan and Judge Ortiz, colluded to defraud him. Now, Mr. Kaplan, I want you to tell me your precise whereabouts from the hours of...."

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "Let's cut to the chase. The medical record will show that I have suffered a massive, debilitating stroke, and the legal record will show that specialists under Mr. Bacci's own supervision had me declared incompetent as an individual not six months ago. Any testimony I might give can't have standing in the State of California."

"Mmm," she mused, consulting her softscreen for a long moment. Then she turned to me. "Doctor, did you hear any conversation between Mr. Kaplan and Judge Ortiz that would suggest such a conspiracy?"

I fiddled with my cap. "Would you please put your question in writing?" I asked.

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When she did so, I read the sentence, fiddled with my hat again, and replied. "I'm so sorry for the trouble, counselor. I was trained to be a good listener, but, you see, I've become stone deaf, and my hat's not entirely reliable. So I could hardly...."

"Judge Ortiz," she said, looking down at her softscreen again, sucking her upper lip. "Did you see anything today to call into question the legal standing of the woman known as Bette Waters as a legitimate entertainer seeking professional advice from Mr. Bacci?"

Ortiz twirled his red and white cane, and a bright red dot flew around the room. The dot finally got her attention. "Justice is blind," he said, setting his cane on the floor and rising. "Now can we go?"

That hour at the prosecutor's office, however, wasn't the strangest thing that happened toward the end of that day. Miguel, who said he'd never had a better time in his life, and who still is with us as our driver, ran us back to Casa Escobar to retrieve the gurneys.

They were there in the alcove, all right. But Tiger Montelban wasn't, and neither was the one-hundred-and-twelve-year-old lady.

The busboy was distraught. He'd checked every quarter hour, he told us. He'd been a bit late just after five because he'd had to help set up for dinner. When he'd finally looked in the alcove, they were gone — the tops of the gurneys empty landscapes of rumpled sheets and dented pillows punctuated by a trailing IV line. The restaurant staff had searched the neighborhood. People on the street spoke of an elderly couple in white who looked to be romantically involved, but it was just impossible. There was no report back at the nursing home, nothing from the nearby hospitals, nothing from the police or the morgue. To this day, we don't have a clue to what happened to them, except for a series of charges that appeared on Montelban's credit chip at a resort in Cabo San Lucas. The chip had been embedded in his wrist.

These days we count on Arcadia for our medical care three days out of every seven, but otherwise we spend extended weekends at the house in Brentwood, sitting in leather furniture, watching sports in the den, taking in old movies with Barbara and Bette and Ramona in the screening room — that's really a treat, as Marv has remastered digital holos of all the great ones from the past hundred and fifty years, from *Birth of a Nation* to the ten Lucas *Star Wars* sequels. Monica's a regular angel, kind and

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considerate and a world-class caterer, though we do our best to look after ourselves as much as we can.

Barbara and I have taken to light exercise in the pool and lounging beside the cabana. Every once in a while, lying on my back, relaxed and at peace — a third try with stem cells has reduced my tremor — I look up and think of them, Tiger Montelban and his angel. Occasionally I see them in the shapes of clouds rolling in the sky, soft and free as floating gauze or down, white as bright moonlight on a snow-covered mountain, drifting in the heavens together, arm in arm.

"Tell me again what a bad bug I've been."

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In "The Thief with Two Deaths" (June 2000), Chris Willrich introduced us to the poet Persimmon Gaunt and the eponymous Imago Bone; as unlikely a duo as we've seen since Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. Their latest adventure is a dense and richly rewarding tale.

Mr. Willrich says he grew up in the Puget Sound area and is fond of the rain there, which might explain some of the imagery in this tale. These days he lives in California and works in the Stanford University library.

King Rainjoy's Tears

By Chris Willrich

A king of Swanisle delights in rue
And his name's a smirking groan.
Laughgloom, Bloodgrin, Stormproud we knew
Before Rainjoy took the throne.

—Rainjoy's Curse

IT WAS SUNSET IN Serpenttooth when Persimmon Gaunt hunted the man who put oceans in bottles.

The town crouched upon an islet off Swanisle's west coast, and scarlet light lashed it from that distant (but not unreachable) place where the sunset boiled the sea. The light produced a striking effect, for the people of Serpenttooth were the desperate and outcast, and they built with what they found, and what they found were the bones of sea serpents. And at day's end it seemed the gigantic, disassembled beasts struggled again toward life, for a pale, bloody sheen coated the town's archways,

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balustrades, and rooftops. Come evening the illusion ceased, and the bones gave stark reflection to the moon.

But the abductor meant to be gone before moonrise.

From the main town she ascended a cliffside pathway of teeth sharp as arrowheads, large as stepping-stones. The teeth ended at a vast, collapsed skull, reinforced with earth, wood, and thatch, bedecked with potted plants. There was a door, a squarish fragment of cranium on hinges, with a jagged eyeslit testifying to some ancient trauma.

Shivering in the briny sea-wind, Gaunt looked over her shoulder at the ruddy sunset rooftops. She did not see the hoped-for figure of a friend, leaping among the gables. "Your last chance to help, Imago," she murmured. She sighed, turned, and knocked.

Blue eyes, dimly glowing, peered through the eyeslit. "Eh?" wheezed a harsh voice. Gaunt imagined in it the complaints of seagulls, the slap of breakers.

"Persimmon Gaunt," she answered. "A poet."

"A bard?" The voice snorted. "The king exiled those witch-women, ten years gone."

"I am not a bard! My tools are stylus and wax, paper and quill, not voice and memory. I have the distinction of being banished by the bards, before the king banished them."

Gaunt could be charming, particularly in such a setting: her specialty in verse was morbidity, the frail railing of life against merciless time. Serpenttooth suited her. More, she suited Serpenttooth, her fluttering auburn hair a wild contrast to her pale, angular face, the right cheek tattooed with a rose ensnared by a spiderweb.

But these charms failed. "What do you want, *poet*?"

"I am looking for the maker."

"Maker of *what*?"

"Of this."

She lifted a small, corked bottle. Within nestled an intricate, miniature sailing ship fashioned of bone. Its white sails curved in an imaginary wind; its banners were frozen in the midst of rippling. Yet the ship was not the extraordinary thing. There was water below it, not bone or glass, and the water moved: not the twitching of droplets but the roiling of a shrunken corner of the sea. It danced and flickered, and the ship heaved to and fro, riding the tiny surge.

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Gaunt waved the bottle in various directions, but the ship cared nothing for gravity, forever hugging its tiny sea.

"Exquisite," Gaunt murmured, and not for the first time.

"A trinket," sniffed the other.

"Trinket? For four years these 'trinkets' have been the stuff of legend along the coast! And yet their fame does not travel further. Most who own such bottles — sailors, fishermen, pirates, and all their wives, lovers, and children — will not sell at any price. It's said these folk have all lost something dear to the sea."

"Nothing to do with me."

"There is more." Gaunt unstoppered the bottle. "Listen. Hear the sound of the sea. Hear the deep loneliness, and the deep romance. To know it is to know mischievous waves, and alluring shores. To brush raw fingertips against riches and fame. To wrap scarred arms around hunger and harm. To know the warm fantasy of a home long abandoned, and the cold acceptance of a five fathom grave."

And there was a susurrant murmur from the bottle which held all these things, and more which Gaunt, too chill already, would not say. There came a long answering sigh from behind the door. It blended with the murmur, and Gaunt could not distinguish them.

Weakly, the voice said, "Nothing to do with me. Go."

"I cannot. When an...associate of mine procured this item, he found the private memoirs of the owner. We know who you are, Master Salt."

A pause. "You are base thieves."

Gaunt smiled. "Imago would insist he is a *refined* thief, I'm sure. And our victim was a dying lord who had no further use for the bottle."

"What do you want?"

"I bring you greetings," Gaunt said, "from your *own* maker."

There was silence. The door opened on creaking hinges. A figure stepped aside, and Gaunt entered.

The room resembled a captain's cabin, though it filled a sea serpent's skull, not a vessel's stern. Two oval, bone-framed windows overlooked the ruddy sunset sea. Underneath, shutters covered twin ventilation passages to the skull's nostrils. Nearby, a spyglass rested atop a bookcase of nautical texts. But the other dozen bookcases cradled dozens of ships-in-bottles, each bearing its own churning, miniature sea. Half-constructed

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vessels listed upon a vast table, pieces scattered like wreckage.

Gaunt plunked her bottle upon the table, ship sailing forever ceilingward.

Master Salt bent over it. "The *Darkfast Dreamweaver*. Fitting. Named for a great philosopher-thief of Ebontide." A smile sliced his face.

He was built like a sea barrel, yet possessed delicately shimmering blue skin. His bald head resembled a robin's egg gleaming with dew. "Her crew captured the hatchling of a Serpent of the Sunset. Quite a story. But they overfed the child, to keep it from thrashing. It outgrew its bonds, fed well indeed."

He nodded at the shelves. "Lost ships, all of them. I see their profiles in my dreams. Hear their names on the morning wind."

"They are astonishing. The king will be enthralled."

"Him," muttered Salt. "He neglected me, my sisters. Left us eight years in our tower, because we dared remind him he had a soul. We resolved to seek our own lives."

Gaunt said, "Now your exile is ended."

"Not exile. Escape."

"Surely you cannot abandon him," Gaunt persisted, "being what you are."

"If you know what I am, poet, you should fear me. Inhuman myself, I read the sorrow behind human eyes."

His gaze locked hers. Gaunt shivered as though a westerly wind scoured her face, but could not look away.

Salt squinted, then smirked. "You say *I* abandon? I see what you've left behind. You forsook the bards for the written word. And now you even neglect your art...for the love of a thief."

Master Salt's eyes changed. One moment they glowed a pale blue; then they resembled blue-sheened, mirrored glass. Yet the person reflected in them was not Gaunt, nor was the moment this one. Instead she beheld a scene from an hour ago.

A man leapt to and fro upon buildings of bone. There was a strange style to his movements. Though he chose his destinations in a boyish rush, his rooftop dance obeyed a strict economy, as though an old man carefully doled out a youth's energy. When he paused, Gaunt could see the two scars of his lean, ferretlike face, one made by steel, one by fire. He

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gazed out from Master Salt's eyes as if searching for her. Then he leapt to a new height.

"The thief Imago Bone, your lover and sometimes your mentor, prancing about on bone rooftops. Suppose he couldn't resist." Salt blinked his eyes back to their former, glowing state. "But you knew he might be gone for hours. Impatient, you continued alone."

Gaunt's breathing quickened. She found she could not evade Master Salt, nor lie. "Yes. For all Bone's skill..."

"...he is a boy," Master Salt said. "Yes, I see. I can taste sorrows, poet. Imago Bone's life is an accident, is it not? Bizarre magics stretched his adolescence nearly a century. Only now is he aging normally. He is a great thief; but he is a child in many ways. You fear for him. You are as often his guardian as his student. An unlikely pair, following foolish quests."

"They are not foolish." Gaunt shivered, staring into the shimmering blue eyes. "Not all...."

"Quests are excuses, poet. You must live as you wish. As I have done. You do not need bards, or Imago Bone, or King Rainjoy to justify your wanderlust."

Gaunt imagined she felt the tug of the trade winds. Or perhaps it was the clatter of a horse beneath her, the taste of bow-spray from a river canoe, the scent of a thousand fragile mountain wildflowers.

"A true wanderer," Salt said, "needs no nation, no captain, no hope of gold to answer the siren lure."

And Gaunt wondered, why had she tried to refashion Bone and herself as heroes, when they could simply travel, drink in the world?

But no, this quest was *not* foolish. She must resist Salt's words. "There — will be war," she stammered, "unless Rainjoy can learn compassion.... And he never can, without you."

"I see also," Salt said unmoved, "why you help him."

Gaunt lowered her eyes.

"Abandon that guilt, poet. Abandon all that imprisons you! Leave this quest; join Bone as a thief if it suits you, or shirk him as well — either way, seize your freedom, and do not abuse mine." Salt lifted his hand to Gaunt's mouth. "I did not ask to become a *someone*, any more than humans do. Yet here I am, and I will set my own course. I will hear the sea, and trap its cries."

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Now Master Salt scraped a thumbnail against the tip of an index finger, and a blue droplet fell against Gaunt's lips. As the salty tang kissed her, she imagined the rocking of a deck underfoot, heard the songs of seamen raising sail, smelled the stinging brine upon the lines. Her heart skipped once and her eyelids drooped, as she slipped toward a dream of adventure in distant waters, not merely losing her existence, but casting it aside like soiled clothes.

But then from somewhere came Imago Bone's easy voice. "You should listen to him, Gaunt," Bone said. "He makes perfect sense."

With a start, Gaunt opened her eyes. Bone crawled through the passage leading to the dragon-skull's nostrils, face blue from the cliffside winds and sweaty from carrying his many pouches of esoteric tools: ironsilk lines, quicksap adhesive, a spectrum of camouflaging dyes.

As Master Salt turned, Bone sprang to the bottle sheltering the miniature *Darkfast Dreamweaver*. The thief shattered it against the table's edge.

Salt cried out.

So did the broken bottle.

The miniature ocean within the glass spilled onto the dirt floor, foaming and dwindling like a tendril of surf dying upon shore. A chorus of drowning sailors arose, dimly, like an old memory. Then water and voices were gone.

"Curse you," spat Master Salt, and the spittle boiled upon the table, and gave a sound like maddened seagulls as it vanished. He seized the thief, pressing pale blue thumbs against Bone's throat, thumbs that grew foam-white even as Bone went purple.

"Allow..." the thief gurgled, "allow me to introduce...."

"No," said Master Salt.

"Rude...." Bone's voice trailed off, and he flailed uselessly in Salt's grip.

Bone had saved her. Bone was friend, lover, companion on the road. Nevertheless Gaunt hesitated one moment as he suffocated; so much poetry did the the shelves of bottles hold, they might have cradled densely inked scrolls from ancient libraries.

But she knew what she must do. She shut her eyes and yanked.

The shelves toppled, shattering glass, breaking small ships, spilling

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the trapped substance of Master Salt. The room filled with the despairing cries of lost sailors.

Master Salt shrieked and released Bone, who crumpled, hacking saltwater. Salt knelt as well, trying to clutch the tiny oceans as they misted into nothingness. His knees crunched glass and crushed ships.

Gaunt trembled with the destruction she'd caused. But soon the sailors' voices faded to dim wailing, and she regained her voice.

"Dead sailors move you?" she asked. "Expect more. War is brewing. To prevent it, King Rainjoy will need the compassion he lost. The compassion you bear."

"You speak of compassion? You, who can do this?"

"These voices are of men already lost. But if war comes, they will seem just a drop in a surgeon's pail."

Salt lowered his head.

"I will go," he said at last. "If only to prevent your crushing more dreams."

Imago Bone rose with a look of gratitude, put his hand upon Gaunt's shoulder.

"I regret I did not arrive sooner," he whispered, then smiled ruefully. "The skeletal rooftops, they beckoned...."

"We'll talk of it later," Gaunt said. "No one can help being who they are." She leaned against him, but could not bear to look at him, nor at Master Salt, who gathered broken ships, tenderly, bone by scattered bone.

"The first is found," sighed the man upon the ivory chair.

An older man, shuffling through the chamber of mists, stopped and coughed. "Majesty?"

"Persimmon Gaunt. And her companion thief." The voice was dim, and flat. "They have found the first. Soon, all will be well."

"The reports I bring, ah, belie such optimism." The older man scuttled closer. His robes fluttered with no regard to the drafts. "The nobles, hm, demand war with the Eldshore, if you cannot secure an alliance by marriage. I suggest you build ships, raise troops." He raised a wrinkled hand before the king's nose, then snatched at something only he could see.

He inverted the hand, revealing an *enfleshment* from the king's

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memory, the tiny image of a red-haired woman, proud and bejeweled. She spat in the king's direction. Her voice rose dimly: *You are cold, with no soul within you. You shall never have me.* Turning on her heel, she stalked off the palm and into nonexistence.

"Eldshore's princess *will* marry me," said the king, "once I am a better man. Once *they* make me a better man."

"Strange, mm? — that you can sense their doings while I cannot."

Mirthlessly, the king smiled. "You may have made them, sorcerer, but they belong to me."

"Do not hope for too much, my king. War is in the air."

"When you are here, Spawnsworth, the air smells of worse. Leave your reports and go."

When the older man had retreated up a staircase, the king said in a toneless voice without conviction, "I *will* feel again."

From the staircase descended the sounds of tortured things.

THE JOURNEY to Lornbridge took two weeks, but they felt like two years to the thief Imago Bone.

Master Salt spoke only in grunts. Surely thousands of subjects were capable of grunting for their king; why should Rainjoy need this entity in particular?

Gaunt walked as though shouldering a treasure chest of guilt (Bone often pictured metaphorical treasure chests, feeling deprived of real ones) and there was a distance in her eyes even as she lay nights upon his shoulder.

So it was a relief, finally, to risk his neck reaching a well-guarded noblewoman noted for feathering suitors with arrows.

Seen through tall grass, the battlement looked sickly and moist in the moonlight. (Bone's cloak, after a treatment of saps and powders, matched it.) He slithered beside it, scrambled halfway up, paused for heavy bootfalls to pass, then scurried atop. Time for one gulp of manure-scented air, then he was over the other side, hurling a ball of sticky grain as he dove.

He thudded onto a haycart exactly as the pigpen filled with squealing. By the time the guards investigated, the animals would have devoured the evidence. He slipped into courtyard shadows.

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This was more like it: sparks of danger against the steel of brilliant planning. A shame he wasn't stealing anything.

My beloved's doing, Bone thought as he climbed atop a stable. When they met he was a legend, perhaps the greatest second-story man of the Spiral Sea. (The higher stories went of course without question.) Though she could pay little, he'd accepted enormous risk recovering a manuscript of hers from a pair of sorcerous bibliophiles, a task that had required another book, a tome of the coldest kind of magic. That matter concluded, he'd undertaken an absurdly noble quest, the accursed tome's destruction.

Absurd nobility impressed Persimmon Gaunt.

Bone smirked, reversed his cloak to the side stained with berry juice, then leapt from the stable roof onto Duskvale Keep itself, clinging to irregularities in the russet stone. His slow corkscrew toward the highest window allowed him time to review six months of inquiries along the Spiral Sea, a process garnering nothing but scars, empty pockets, and a list of enemies who wouldn't at all mind the damnable book for themselves.

Half jesting, half desperate, Bone had proposed consulting the court wizard of Swanisle.

He'd expected scowls. Swanisle was notorious for persecuting the bards of its county Gaunt (a society of women compared to witches, and similarly treated) formerly by burning, today by exile. He'd assumed Persimmon left with her teachers, would seethe at the thought of returning. But she had assented with a strange look.

Bone should have worried more at that look.

Distracted by such thoughts, Bone froze upon hearing a bright *swish*. Presently, from afar, came a dim *thunk*.

Lady Duskvale was firing off correspondence.

There was not one keep at Lornbridge but two, separated by the narrow, abysmal Groangorge. Westward stood Duskvale Keep and eastward rose the sandstone tower of Mountdawn. For generations, Gaunt had explained to Bone, the youth of Duskvale and Mountdawn had swooned for each other, sighing and pining across the impassable deep.

Then, four years ago, the keeps' masters paupered themselves constructing a bridge. The fortresses became one small town. Not merely did a stone span connect the castle; dozens of hundred-foot ropes, cables, and pulleys twisted overhead with messages, squirrels, nobles' drying underwear.

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Yet today the bridge was guarded, the ropes cut, the youth forbidden to mix.

Swish.

Thunk.

Bone smirked and climbed beside the topmost window.

"Oh, why does he not write me?" he heard a voice exclaim.

Bone craned his head. "Perhaps because — "

"Ay!"

An arrow shot past, a roll of paper wound upon the shaft.

This time there followed no *thunk* but a dim clatter upon the stone bridge.

"Perhaps," Bone said, heart pounding, "because he is not as good a shot as yourself. Though I am pleased even you must aim."

"Who are you?" the voice demanded.

Bone crouched upon the sill, and bowed. "Bone: acquirer of oddities."

Lady Duskvale regarded him with hawk-dark eyes framed by stern cheekbones and black rivulets of hair. "Do you plan mischief? I warn you, I will tolerate mischief with but one man, and he I fire arrows at. For you I have a knife for stabbing, and lungs for screaming."

"I have no wish for mischief, stabs, or screams."

"Are you...are you a messenger from Lord Mountdawn?"

"Better than that, my lady. I am Bone. I and the poet Gaunt have come to comfort Lornbridge. May I enter?"

"I would be more comforted with you outside."

"Even a footpad's foot may fall asleep."

"One moment." She nocked an arrow, drew, and aimed. Then she backed into the room. "All right."

Bone leapt inside. "I admire your caution — and more, the strength of your arm — but it is not thieves at your window you must fear. It is the embodiment of sorrow."

She raised her eyebrows, and Bone helped himself to a chair beside a small table serviceable as a shield. He drummed his fingers upon it. "Consider, my lady. In your father's day, these keeps were famous for romance. Men and women pined hopelessly from across the gulf. But that has changed."

"You mock me, thief?" Duskvale's fingers quivered upon the bowstring, as did Bone's upon the table. "Of course it has changed."

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"Explain."

"Very well, though my arm grows weaker. Four years ago my father and old Lord Mountdawn, rest their souls, heard identical whispers in their sleep, imploring them to build the bridge. For a time all was glorious. Yet if there are whispers now, they implore weeping. Bravos duel for damsels, spurned paramours hurl themselves into the gorge. Only I and my love, young Lord Mountdawn, are spared these frenzies, for we are calculating and circumspect."

A carrier pigeon fluttered through the window, alighting upon a perch near Duskvale. She regarded it and Bone, then sighed and set down her bow. (Bone released a long breath.) Removing a note from the pigeon's foot, Duskvale read, "'*Soon I must fight my way across the bridge to your side. Each arrow is a caress, but I would kiss the callouses of the hand that fired it. Dear one! Alive or dead, my bloody hide arrives in the morning!*'" She looked up in vexation. "You are interrupting a private conversation, you know. Explain your purpose."

"Are you aware," Bone asked, "that your monarch was once called the Weeping King?"

"Rainjoy?" she mused. "I heard Father say as much. A sensitive boy crushed by the crown's weight, weeping at the consequences of all commands." She crushed Mountdawn's note. "Men *can* be overwrought at times. But the king has changed. Now they call him Rainjoy the Stonefaced. What does it matter?"

"Did your father speak of the Pale Council?"

"Everyone knows of them," Duskvale said impatiently. "Rainjoy's wise advisors. They came from far away and never went among the people. But the people loved them, for they counseled compassion, and kept the king's cruel wizard at bay. But they departed four years ago and this is of no consequence and my beloved is about to die for me."

"Hear this: the Council did not come from a far land, nor did they return there. One member dwells nearby."

"What?"

"They are creatures of magic, my dear, born of a bargain between Rainjoy and his wizard."

"What bargain?"

"That Rainjoy, so wracked by conscience he could not function as

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king, should weep but three more tears in his life. Yet those tears would be given human form, so when Rainjoy wished he could safely seek the insights of sorrow."

Duskvale fingered her bow. "Impossible."

"No, merely quite ill-advised. I've met one such tear. Another dwells here. We will need your help, and your paramour's, to snare it. Tell me, do you retain builders' plans for the bridge?"

In the end it was the sincerity in Bone's eyes, or (more likely) the desperation in Duskvale's heart, that bade her send a pointed message to Mountdawn and then summon servants to make certain preparations. Bone was relieved not to relate stealing her father's ship-in-a-bottle and rifling his memoirs. For it was Lord Duskvale who had owned the faux *Darkfast Dreamweaver*, its surging in harmony with the whispers of Lornbridge.

Soon the moonlight found the thief whistling, strolling across that great stone arch. At midpoint he squeezed a tiny sack of quicksap, which he smeared full across his gloves, then applied to his shoes.

He descended the bridge's side, enjoying the brisk mountain air, the churning murmur of the river far below, the tickle of vertigo. Presently there came a swish from the west and a thunk to the east.

At this signal Bone crawled underneath the span, hairs pointing toward watery, rocky doom. Where the plans indicated it would be, he discovered a square opening. He crawled inside.

Blue light surrounded him. "Who?" called a bleak voice, like a hollow wind through a shattered house.

The chamber was like a monk's cell, a cold stone sitting room with a few books (with such titles as *Ballad of the Poisoned Paramour* and *The Tragickal History of Violet Swoon*), some decoration (withered roses), odd mementos (lockets with strands of hair inside), and a lamp (bearing not oil but a pale blue liquid glimmering like glacial moonlight).

"I had gambled," Bone said, shedding his gloves, "you would not wish to miss the romantic play of light upon the river. I am Imago Bone," he added, changing his shoes, "and I bring greetings from the king."

The quicksap discarded, Bone gazed upon Rainjoy's tear. She resembled a spindly, large-eyed maiden in a white shift. She shimmered gently in the blue light, reflecting and echoing it. Her long white hair fluttered and frayed, blending into the chamber's dim mists.

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She regarded Bone with incomprehension. "Rainjoy abandoned us."

"He would enjoy your counsel again."

"I cannot give it. I am not his anymore, a slave, nameless...now I am Mistress Mist. This is my home. There must be love in the world, you see. Lonely were these keeps, but I whispered of this bridge, and they are lonely no longer. Still do I whisper of love."

"You whisper of more than that. Men and women have perished."

"*I* do not slay them," Mist answered sadly. "In my presence they sense what purest love could be, and how far short they fall." She frowned at Bone. "But you — why are *you* here? When your true love is elsewhere, waiting and worrying. Why while your precious moments with me? Do you abandon her for me? Do you betray?"

A chill enveloped him; he could not evade those eyes.

He thought of Persimmon Gaunt. Of course he would not betray her for this apparition. And yet — was he not flippant, unheedful of her? His dallying upon the rooftops of Serpenttooth nearly caused her death. Did he not repay devotion with childish disregard? Was he not cruel?

He did not deserve her, he realized, nor life. Better to end his existence now, than risk wounding her further. Bone yearned for the abyss at his back.

But even as the impulse for annihilation took over, his old lust for living cried out. He could not prevent his leap, but he modified the angle and, falling, grasped the ironsilk strand fired by Lady Duskvale.

The thread bent, rose, bent, held. It sliced his palm, and he trembled with the urge to release it, dash himself to bits far below. Fortunately the impulse weakened away from Mist.

He saw Gaunt leaning over the bridge's side. "I am sorry...."

"What?" she shouted.

He shook his head, cried instead: "Pigeon!"

Gaunt raised her arm. From the Mountdawn side of the chasm a pigeon fluttered to alight upon Bone's shoulder, a poem of Gaunt's affixed to its leg. Bone shrugged the bird upward and it fluttered into the hidden chamber. Presently Bone heard a sad voice, reading.

"Love floating skyward is earthly no longer
Braced with selfishness, ardor is stronger

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On solid ground let rest love's wonder —
And so your bridge we break asunder."

"Picks!" Bone shouted, and at once there sang a chorus of metal biting stone.

"No!"

A large silvery blob, like a pool of mercury ignorant of gravity, flowed from beneath the bridge and oozed upward to the span. Blue light rose from that spot, and although Bone could not see her, he heard Mist shout, "I concede! The bridge will be mute without me. Please do not break it. Keep it, and find love if you can. I will go."

A voice like lonely seabirds answered, "They snared me likewise, sister. For we cannot destroy as they do."

"Yes, brother. They ruin themselves, and each other. We only awaken their sorrow."

"But the last tear will defeat them, sister. The last is the strongest of all."

"The second is found," said the king in the room of mists.

Framing the ivory throne, twin pillars of rainwater poured from funnels and spilled into a pool with a swan's outline, wingtips catching the water, nose aimed at the throne's foot, a drain where the heart should be. Just as they believed distress strengthened the spirit, the royal house of Swanisle believed chill weather quickened the flame within a man.

The king rose, undressed, and waded in, his pensive expression unchanged.

From beside the throne his companion said carefully, "This poet is, ah, resourceful."

"Of course. She is a bard of Gaunt."

"Mm. Never forget, majesty, her ilk caused you great pain."

The king shivered in his pool. It gave him a look that resembled passion. "Great pain. And great wonder. I remember how every spider in its shimmering, dew-splattered web was an architect of genius to be cherished, not squashed. I remember a defiant spark in the eyes, a stony strength in the limbs of every maiden men declared ugly. I remember the disbelieving child in the faces of condemned men, a child whose mind might yet encompass creation, were that infinite head still upon that

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foreshortened neck. I remember knowing these things, Spawnsworth, but I can no longer *feel* them. But *they* will help. Soon."

"Soon," the wizard murmured, scratching his chin. His robe quivered, jerked, as though pained by needlepricks.

NIGHTSWAN ABBEY formed the outline of a soaring bird, and although its crumbling bulk no longer suggested flight of any kind, the music pouring from its high windows did much to compensate.

A crowd of the young and elderly gathered beneath the sanctuary windows every evening to hear the sweet polyphony, as the purple sunset kissed the first of the night's stars. The sisterhood could sing only within these walls; all else would be vanity. Even so, during the last four years their music had rekindled some of Nightswan's fame, long dimmed in this age of grim, conquering kings.

It was as if those hundred mortal throats conjured the spirit of the Swan Goddess of the Night and the Stars, she who plunged into the sun, seawater glistening upon her wings, to cool its fire and make the Earth temperate and fit for life, she whose charred body fell back into the sea, to become Swanisle.

The music ceased and the listeners drifted away, murmuring to one another — all save four, who slipped among the bushes. Soon, two reemerged, one casting a line to a window, the second glancing backward. "They will not flee," Gaunt whispered. "They are contemptuous, certain their sister will humble us. I am uneasy."

Bone shrugged. "We will handle her. We've seen worse, we two."

Gaunt did not reply.

They ascended to the vast sanctuary, slipping behind the winged marble altar of the Swan. In the pews a lone nun prayed. Her white cap, cut in the outline of a swan, enhanced the rich darkness of a robe embroidered with tiny stars. The intruders made hand signals: they would pause until she departed.

Then the nun looked up, her face still shadowed by her hood, and sang in a voice sweet as any of the abbey's chorus, yet with an unexpected pain, as though a delicate aperitif were served too hot. The first stanza was muted, but her voice rose with the second:

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King Stormproud fell to war's caress,
Left Swanisle to his boy,
Who had not learned to love distress:
Soft-hearted was Rainjoy.

Gaunt gave Bone a sharp look, listening.

His shivering toes just touched the floor
When he claimed his father's chair.
When the sad queen's heart would beat no more
He tore his silky hair.

The nun rose. The intruders hid themselves behind the onyx, speckled pulpit as she approached the altar, still singing.

Yet when a wizard of county Gaunt
(Spawnsworth was his name)
Tried his wicked strength to flaunt
The boy king's heart took flame.

For all Gaunt's fear, and all its horror
Marched as Rainjoy's foe.
Enfleshment *was the wizard's lore —*
To fashion warriors from woe.

The sister knelt where the wine was kept, the wine that symbolized the goddess's blood, shed to make all life possible. She cast a surreptitious glance over her shoulder. Her face was a pale, dimly glowing blue, growing brighter as she sang.

Rainjoy led his armies north,
Felled the work of Spawnsworth's hands,
Yet surely more would soon ride forth
Till they conquered all his lands.

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Now the bards of Gaunt were rightly known
To clasp old secrets to the breast.
So the army overturned every stone
Till the king beheld the best.

The nun passed her hand over the wine vessel, and shining droplets fell into the dark liquid. They quickly dimmed, and the wine appeared as before.

"Gaunt's ancient thanes," King Rainjoy spoke,
"The very land would quick obey.
"To free it from the wizard's yoke
"I must know Gaunt as did they."

The woman said, "What you seek takes years,
"A lifetime spent in Gaunt,
"A knowledge born of woe and tears,
"Not a young man's morning jaunt."

"My father died on Eldshore's strand.
"My mother died of loss.
"A wizard makes to seize my land —
"This die I'll gladly toss."

At last Gaunt could stand waiting no more, and stepped forward. The nun ceased singing, caught her breath.

Gaunt curtsied. Meanwhile Bone leapt forward, tumbled, rolled, and stood where he blocked the nun's best retreat. He bowed low, eyes upon her.

In a hot, dusky voice more evocative of tavern than tabernacle, the nun said, "You are agents of the king, I take it?" She raised her head, showing a weary blue face and sapphire smile like a dagger-cut. "I've sensed my siblings being gathered."

"You are correct. I am Persimmon...of Gaunt. A poet. This is my companion, Bone. We bear Rainjoy's plea for your help. He must marry Eldshore's princess to stop a war, but she refuses. She senses Rainjoy feels no sorrow, knows no compassion."

"A wise woman." The tear laughed, one sharp, jarring note. "I am

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Sister Scald. You are a poet of Gaunt? Did Gaunt's bards train you, before Rainjoy exiled them?"

"They did," Gaunt said, "before exiling *me*."

Glimmering eyes widened. "Did you learn 'Rainjoy's Curse?'"

"Yes," Gaunt said. And she did not sing, but continued Scald's song in speech.

She led him then, where doomed ships had lunged
At cliffs where white foam churned;
To chasms where young suitors plunged;
To pyres where bards had burned.

She wooed him with rhymes of sailors drowned,
And songs of lovers dead,
And poems of bards long in the ground,
Until she wooed him to her bed.

Into a fevered dream he fell
Of the web that snares all lives —
One soul's joy breeds another's hell.
One suffers, and one thrives.

He woke to slaps: For bedding her so,
She offered jibe and taunt.
He trembled chill as she did go;
For now he knew the soul of Gaunt.

And when the nightmare horde returned,
Raised from Gaunt's old pain,
He told it, "Sleep, for I have learned:
"Let the land swallow you again."

The warriors melted into earth
And the wizard quick was seized.
Spawnsworth said, "O king of worth,
"How might you be appeased?"

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Rainjoy trembled. "I feel each death.
"All paths shine slick with blood.
"I cannot bear to end your breath."
The mage swore fealty where he stood.

A king of Swanisle delights in rue
And his name's a smirking groan.
But in Rainjoy endless tears did brew
And he longed for eyes of stone.

Scald's voice bit the silence. "He has those eyes now. The bards gave him knowledge of all life's woe, but Spawnsworth tricked him out of his tears. For a time he still consulted us, but who willingly seeks out sorrow? At last he consulted us no more. He became the sort of king Spawnsworth could control."

"He senses what he's lost. Serve him again."

"I serve others now."

Bone broke in. "Indeed? Your brother served others with bottled grief, your sister with a bridge of doomed desire. We threatened these contrivances; the tears surrendered. I say good riddance."

"You mock *their* work, thief?" Scald seized Bone's chin, locked eyes with his. "I see into your soul, decrepit boy. You've begun aging at last, yet you fritter away your moments impressing this foolish girl. And *you* — " She released Bone, snatched Gaunt's ear — "you forsook the glory of voice and memory for clumsy meanderings of ink. Now you neglect even that dubious craft following this great mistake of a man." Scald stepped back, dismissing poet and thief with a wave. "What a pair you are, what a waste of wind your love! Who are *you*, to lecture me?"

Shivering, Gaunt looked away, toward the tall windows and bright stars. But she replied. "I will tell you, tear of Rainjoy. I was a girl who saw the boy king rescue county Gaunt from the creatures who tore her family to bits. I was a bard's apprentice who loved him from afar. And when my teacher *boasted* of how she granted his request by breaking his spirit, I knew I'd follow her no more."

She looked at Bone, who regarded her wonderingly. "I'd not guard secret lore in my skull, but offer my words in ink, telling of grief such that

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anyone could understand. I would tarry in graveyards and let tombs inspire my verse. For if the bards hoarded living song, I would peddle the dead, written word." Gaunt returned her gaze to Scald. "When Spawnsworth made an end to Rainjoy's weeping, the king's first act was to exile the bards. And how I laughed that day. Come, tear. You cannot shame me. I will repay my teachers' debt."

"You surprise me," Scald said, "but I think you will not take me. I have no bottles, no bridge to harm. My substance passes into the sacramental wine, inspiring the sisters' music. Would you destroy all grapes in the world?"

"I do not need to." Gaunt gestured toward the door.

Scald turned, saw a cluster of black, star-speckled habits underneath white swan hats.

A nun with a silver swan necklace stepped forward, old hands trembling. "We have listened, Sister Scald. Gaunt and Bone sent warning by carrier pigeon that they would seek a king's tear this night, unaware we'd knowingly given you sanctuary. I have been torn, until this moment. I might defy even Rainjoy to honor our pledge, Scald.... But you have meddled with our sacraments. You must go."

"*Oathbreaker*," Scald snarled. She looked right and left. "All of you — all humans are traitors, to yourselves, to others. Listen then, and understand."

And Scald sang.

This song was wordless. It was as though the earlier music was simply the white breakers of this, the churning ocean, or the moonlit fog-wisps crossing the lip of this, the crevasse. Now the cold depths were revealed. They roared the truth of human treachery, of weakness, of pain.

Before that song the humans crumpled.

"No...." Gaunt whimpered, covering her face.

"Nothing...." whispered Bone. "I am nothing...not man, not boy. A waste...."

Somehow, Bone's anguish bestirred Gaunt to defy her own. "You are something." She wrenched each word from her throat like splinters torn from her own flesh. "You are not a waste."

The sisters knelt, some mouthing broken regretful words, some clawing for something sharp, something hard, to make an end. But Gaunt

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raised her head to the singer. "Scald...." It should have been a defiant cry, but it emerged like a child's plea. "Look what you do, to those who sheltered you...."

Scald's eyes were hard, lifted ceilingward in a kind of bitter ecstasy. Yet she looked, and for a time watched the nuns cringing upon the stone floor.

She went silent.

She walked to one of the high windows. "I am no better than you," she murmured. "I sense my siblings, like me born of regret. It seems we cannot escape it." Scald removed her swan cap and lowered her head. "We will go."

Gaunt helped Bone to his feet. He clutched her shoulders as though grasping some idea rare and strange. "Why did you not tell me," he said, "of your family?"

She lowered her gaze. "When you suggested Spawnsworth might deal with that accursed tome we've locked away, Bone, I believed his skills were not appropriate and his character untrustworthy. But I realized we two might somehow repay the debt I felt to Rainjoy. It was a deception, Bone, one that deepened with time. I feared you would be angry."

He nodded. "Perhaps later. Now I am merely glad there is still a Gaunt to perhaps be angry with. It is done. For better or worse, we've recovered Rainjoy's tears."

She met his look. "Are they, Bone? Are they Rainjoy's? Or are they more like grown children? I think whatever their faults, they have seized control of their existence. I think they are people." She scowled in frustration. "I fear Scald is right; I am never consistent."

"You cannot deliver them up, now, can you?"

She shook her head. "Forgive me, Bone. We've gained nothing."

"I disagree." He leaned forward, kissed her.

Startled, she kissed him back, then pulled away. "You are changing the subject! You can never focus on one thing; you are forever a boy."

"Fair enough, but I say *you* are the subject, and you are what I've gained. I know you better, now. And I would rather know you better, Persimmon Gaunt, than plunder all the treasure-vaults of Brightcairn. Though I'd cheerfully do both."

She gaped at him. "Then...you have your wish. Whatever Scald may

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think of us." She gazed at the bent figure beside the window. "To risk losing you three times this journey — it makes me care nothing for how odd is our love, our life. It is ours, and precious."

"Then my dear," Bone said, "let's discuss how we'll evade the king's assassins, when we break our pledge."

"How precious...." Gaunt murmured, still watching Scald, and her eyebrows rose. "No, we will not break it, Bone! We will fulfill it too well."

A STORM FROTHED against King Rainjoy's palace, and the hall of mists felt like a ship deck at foggy dawn. Salt, Mist, and Scald stepped toward the ivory throne, knelt beside the swan pool. Behind the Pale Council stood Persimmon Gaunt and Imago Bone.

Upon the throne, the king studied his prodigal tears.

"So," he said.

The tears blinked back.

"Gaunt and Bone," said the wizard Spawnsworth from beside the throne, his cloak twisting as though with suppressed annoyance. "I, ah, congratulate you. You have accomplished a great deed."

"Not so difficult," Bone said easily. "Send us to fetch the morning star's shyer cousin, or the last honest man's business partner, and we might have surrendered. These three were not so well hidden." He smiled. "Anyone might have found them."

"Whatever," Spawnsworth said with a dismissive wave. "Your, um, modesty covers mighty deeds. Now, Majesty, I would examine these three in private. They have dwelled apart too long, and I fear they might be, ah, unbalanced. It might be years before I dare release them."

The tears said nothing, watching only Rainjoy.

"Yes," Rainjoy murmured, staring back, agreeing to something Spawnsworth had not said. "Yes, I would...speak with them."

Before the sorcerer could object, Gaunt said, "Alas, my king, Spawnsworth's fears are quite justified. I regret where duty leads."

With that, she drew a dagger and stabbed Sister Scald where her heart ought to have been.

By then Bone had sliced the glistening throats of Master Salt and Mistress Mist.

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The king's tears lost their forms, spilling at once from their robes, flowing like pale blue quicksilver into the swan pool, where they spiraled down into the drain and were lost to sight.

"What?" King Rainjoy whispered, shaking, rising to his feet. "What?"

"It was necessary, Majesty," Gaunt said. "They had become mad. They meant you harm."

"We suspected," Bone said, "that only in your presence could they die."

"Die," echoed Rainjoy. He sank back onto the throne.

Spawnsworth had gone pale, his cloak twitching in agitated spasms. But his voice was calm as he said, "I will wish to investigate the matter, of course...but. It seems you have done the kingdom a great, ah, service. It is not too late, I would say, to consider a reward. You sought my advice?"

Rainjoy cradled his head in his hands.

"Alas," said Gaunt, her eyes on the king, "our time with the tears has been instructive regarding your art. It is powerful, to be sure, but not suited to our problem. No offense is meant."

Spawnsworth frowned. "Then gold, perhaps? Jewels?"

Bone swallowed, but said nothing.

"My king," said the sorcerer, "what do you...." Then he bit his lip.

Rainjoy wept.

"My king," repeated Spawnsworth, looking more nonplused than when Salt, Mist, and Scald vanished down the drains.

It was little more than a sparkling wetness along the left eye, a sheen that had barely begun to streak. Rainjoy wiped it with a silken sleeve. "It is nothing," Rainjoy said, voice cold.

Gaunt strode around the pool and up to the throne, ignoring Spawnsworth's warning look. She touched Rainjoy's shoulder.

"It is something," she said.

He stared at her wide-eyed, like a boy. "It is simply.... I let them go for so long. I never imagined I would lose them forever. They did not obey."

"Oh my king," Gaunt said, "my dear king. Tears cannot obey. If they could, they would be saltwater only."

He held up the sleeve, dotted with a tiny wet stain. "I have tears again.... I do not deserve them."

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"Yet here they are. Listen to them, King Rainjoy, even though these tears are mute. And never be parted from them."

The king watched as Gaunt returned to Bone's side. The poet gave the thief one nod, and Imago Bone offered the king an unexpectedly formal bow, before the two clasped hands and walked slowly toward the door. Rainjoy thought perhaps he heard the thief saying, *Your penance, Gaunt, will consist of a six-city larcenous spree which I shall now outline*, and the poet's answering laugh. Perhaps she cast a final look back, but the mists embraced her, and he would never be sure. He regretted it, that he'd never be sure.

"I am sad, Spawnsworth," he said, wondering. "I do not sense life's infinite sorrow. But I am sad."

But Spawnsworth did not answer, and the light in his eyes was not nascent tears but a murderous glint. He stalked up the stairs.

In his tower there twitched a menagerie of personifications: howling griefs, snarling passions, a stormy nature blustering in a crystal dome, a dark night of the soul shrouding the glass of a mirror. In places there lurked experiments that twitched and mewled. Here a flower of innocence sprouted from the forehead of a gargoyle of cynicism. There a phoenix of renewal locked eyes forever with a basilisk of stasis.

Spawnsworth arrived in this sanctum, teeth grinding, and began assembling the vials of love's betrayal and friendship's gloom, the vials he would form into an instrument of revenge upon Gaunt and Bone.

There came a cough behind him.

He whirled and beheld three shining intruders.

"We are not easily slain, as you should know," Master Salt said. He opened a cage.

"We, clearly, are more easily forgotten," said Mistress Mist. She unstoppered a flask.

"But we will see you never forget us," said Sister Scald, pushing a glass sphere to shatter against the floor. "We believe you could use our counsel. Ah, I see there are many here who agree."

As his creations swarmed toward him, it occurred to Spawnsworth that the many grates in the floor, used to drain away blood and more exotic fluids, fed the same sewers as those in the hall of mists. "You cannot do this," he hissed. "You are Rainjoy's, and he would never harm me."

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"We are Rainjoy's no longer," the tears said.

He turned to flee, and felt his own cloak tremble with excitement and spill upward over his face.

Of the many voices heard from the sorcerer's tower that hour, the one most human, the palace servants agreed, was the one most frightening. When they found Spawnsworth's body in the room of empty cages, all remarked how the face was contorted with sorrow, yet the eyes were dry.

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A mere thirty-eight years ago it was when Mr. Disch's work first graced our pages, August 1964 to be precise, and over the years he has introduced us to problems of creativity, taken us on wings of song, given us a man who had no idea, and shown us intrepid kitchen equipment. Now he shares with us a brief but pointed tale in hopes once again of helping us understand human behavior.

The Flâneurs of Mars

By Thomas M. Disch

"I LOVE THEM ALL QUITE dearly," Xglotl declared tipsily, "old and young, male and female, the right-handed and the lefties equally. But I shall never — " It siphoned up the last of the lubricant. " — never understand them."

"Because they eat meat?" Rwng wondered, glancing up from her plate of cherried vermin. "How hypocritical! *You* think nothing of snacking on *their* embryos, even though you credit them with rational thought."

"Well, it all depends on your definition of 'rational,' Rwng, my sweet. They can build complex machines, I'll give you that. Their kilns and ovens and oasts are quite wonderful, and I will be shipping back several to my compeers in Red Sands. They collect objets d'Earth of that sort."

"Really. I've a small trove of nuclear warheads tucked away somewhere near Irkutsk. Do you think they'd be interested in those?"

"No, they prefer homelier artifacts. And movies with Grace Kelly. They adore Grace Kelly, don't ask me why."

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"I won't. Go back, please, to the issue you're avoiding — what it is you don't understand about them, if it's not that they are carnivores."

Xglotl decanted more of the lubricant into his oilcan. "Their religious beliefs."

"But, Xglotl, you're a machine. You can't understand anyone's religious beliefs, whatever planet they may come from."

"Oh, I understand *yours* well enough. You think you're God. It's a very simple faith."

"It suffices to my needs, and that's all a religion has to do."

"Let us begin there then, with regard to the Earthlings and their needs. In the Greco-Roman culture, as it evolved over time, religious faith came ever more to resemble poetic license. Zeus and Hera were a sit-com couple, like Homer and Marge Simpson. Their execution might be of a superior order, the work of a Phidias or a Praxiteles, but their psychology was rudimentary. He was the philandering paterfamilias, she the nagging and vengeful stay-at-home mom."

"Just like the people who worshipped them. People *want* to worship beings just like themselves. It is a universal truth."

"I'll grant that, but I can see no evolutionary advantage in delusions of omnipotence. All those stories about parting the Red Sea and bringing down the walls of Jericho — it's wish fulfillment."

"No, it's the power of prayer. When people pray to me (and I choose to hear them), sometimes I answer their prayers. As in those cases you mention."

Xglotl emitted a subdued strobe of skepticism and continued as though it hadn't heard Rwng's nonsense: "To me religious faith is like children believing they can fly if they wear a bath towel for a cape. And those who act on such a misguided faith will suffer for it."

Rwng used her little paper umbrella to spear one of the cherries decorating the wriggling mice. "Well, *one* evolutionary advantage would be the placebo effect. People of faith recover more quickly from disease. There seems to be some link to the immune system. But the basic reason, I'm sure, is that they're happier. Just as *I* am happier from knowing that I'm God."

"But *everyone* can't be God."

"Indeed no," Rwng agreed quickly. "And a good thing, too! Even

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several gods in one family is a recipe for trouble. Fortunately I'm an orphan, unmarried, and without friends, except for a few servile mechanisms like yourself, whom I created. I'm ideally suited, therefore, to be the deity of a monotheistic religion."

"You know, don't you, that I consider you delusional?"

"You're entitled to. You have free will — as much as any mere machine may be said to have free will." Rwng popped one of the larger mice into her immense maw. "Also, there's this, which.... Mmm, so savory! There is the need for love. As much as we need nourishment we need love. Even machines need to feel there is some Thing that loves them."

"Not that I'm aware," Xglotl said with a supercilious swiveling of its antennae.

"To be unaware of one's need for love is almost as common as the need itself. Oh, that's rather good, isn't it? I think I'll jot it down." Rwng disgorged a pocket notepad and typed a quick memorandum to herself.

"I can understand such a need in mammals," Xglotl conceded. "It would be an extension of their dependency on the maternal flow of blood while in the womb, and their later reliance on the mother as a source of milk."

Rwng's bosom heaved responsively.

"But just because one has an atavistic hunger for milk — " Xglotl's syphon made a slurping sound in its oilcan. " — cannot be a good reason for believing in — "

"In what, Xglotl? Speak up."

Rwng was sitting facing away from the entrance. She had not seen the crouched panthers materialize beneath the hanging ferns, the grape clusters spilling down the colored glass front of the slot machine. She did not catch the sharp scent of olibanum. She did not see the bartender metamorphose to a fish, his dandruff changing, flake by flake to silvery scales, nor did she witness the cocktail waitress shrink into a lynx and leap onto the bar in a single bound to lick the wine stains from its mirrored surface.

She did not see the god Bacchus smile and, as briefly as he'd smiled, vanish.

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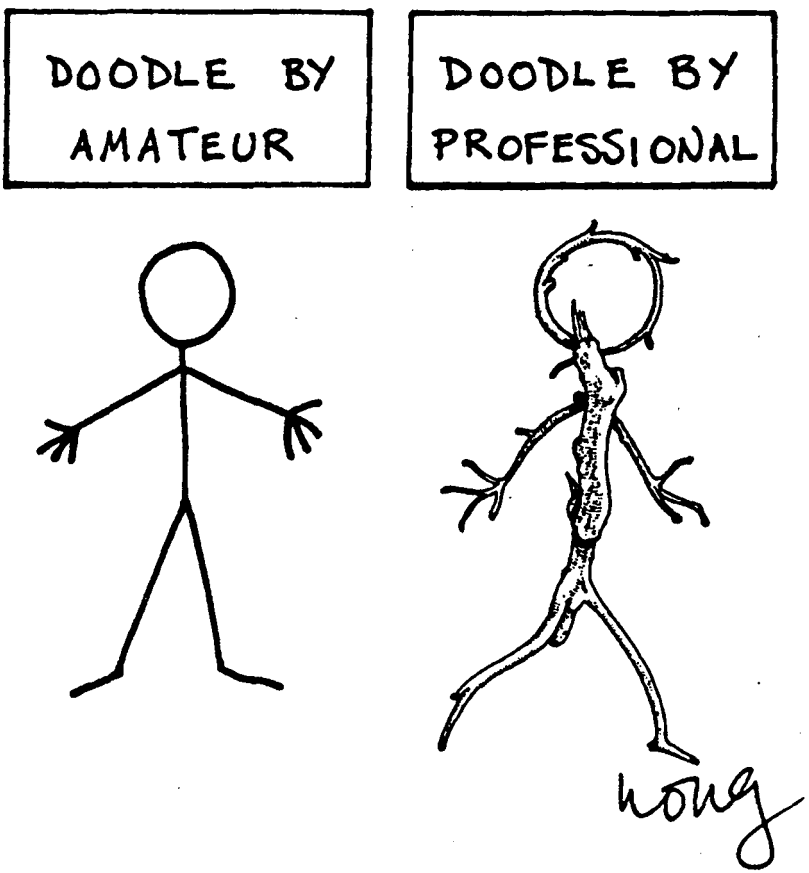
"But perhaps," said Xglotl, not unastonished, "perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps there is something I've left out of my equations."

"Do you mean to say that you are actually letting me *win* an argument!" Rwng exulted.

"Mm," said Xglotl. "If you pick up the tab."



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In the past, Robert Loy has offered up entertaining "hardboiled" looks at advertising ("A Billboard Lovely as a Tree," Dec. 2000 issue) and fairy tales ("Sing a Song of Sixpence, a Bottle Full of Rye," June 1999). Now he takes a skewed look at the dietary habits of the undead.

Mr. Loy says his day job as a Port Police Officer in South Carolina and the work of home-schooling his three children keep him very busy. He does note that he passed the Jeopardy *test, but still awaits "the call." This story goes under the category* UNDEAD DELIGHTS *and the answer is: Would you like a swizzle stick in that?*

You Can't Get Turnip Juice Out of an Aorta

By Robert Loy

ALL THE OLD COUNT WANTED to do was die. Die and stay dead forever.

"I'm tired already. Is death such an unreasonable request from a 600-year-old man?" he asked, looking up at the mute full Moon. But he already knew the answer. Vampires cannot die. Not for long anyway.

The old count knew this because he'd tried hard to end his wretched unlife. He'd ventured out into the noonday sun several times. This was purported to be the only sure way for a bloodsucker to shuffle off his immortal coil. But the old count had found it to be slow and pointlessly agonizing, sort of like setting yourself on fire but without the payoff of actually burning up.

Other methods of self-destruction proved equally effective. Garlic juice in his Bloody Mary had netted him nothing more deadly than dyspepsia. More than once he'd allowed that ridiculous teenager, the one who fancied herself a vampire-hunter, to get close enough to drive a stake deep into his chest. And that had worked. He'd actually been deader than a doornail and death had been just as delightful as he'd dreamed it would be.

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But then some freak electrical storm or mudslide would always come along and throw him out of his comfortable coffin. Or a group of occult-besotted youngsters with a bottle of cheap wine and a Ouija board would roust him from his well-deserved slumbers. Or Lucifer would get a wild hair up his ass.

Something. Always something. And the old count would be back in the damned land of the living, hunting for pitiful prey.

Which is what he was doing now. Standing in an alley, freezing his hemorrhoids off, waiting for some wino or some poor misguided tourist to take a wrong turn.

This is humiliating, the old count thought, blowing on his numb hands. How he longed to swoop down on a tender young maiden as he had so often back in the good old days. But his swooping days were long over. He didn't have enough brain cells left to remember how to turn into a bat, and the busted hip that never healed properly — and ached so awfully on cold nights like this — prevented him from pulling off even a half-assed pounce.

No, vampires cannot die, the old count thought, stamping his feet in a vain effort to warm up. But by god, they can sure as hell get old. With his sedentary lifestyle and his cholesterol-laden diet he'd gained a hundred pounds since his prime. He was deaf as a post and blind as a bat. [The irony was not lost on the old count.] He'd long since traded in his dashing dark cape for size thirty-eight Depends.

But he could live with the bifocals and the Miracle Ear and the diapers. It was the dentures he could not abide — the false fangs that always slipped out at the most inopportune moments or worse, got stuck in the neck of some pitiful couch potato too flabby and lungless to outrun a sexacentenarian.

Having to excavate your canines from the throat of some lame or lardy schmuck. Now that really made the old count wish he were dead.

Footsteps at the entrance of the alleyway jerked the vampire out of his morbid musings. He adjusted his glasses as he stepped cautiously from the shadows.

It was a male, curse the luck. Although it had been centuries since anyone had considered him a ladies' man, the old count still did not like the taste of testosterone.

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Not that the young dandy mincing his way down alley appeared to be brimming over with manly hormones. Hell, he looked like he might even be anemic, which meant the count would be hungry again in an hour, and now there wasn't enough time to stop on the way home and grab a diabetic for dessert.

"Pardon me, sir," the old count said, stepping out into the path of the young man. "Can you spare a dollar for a man down on his luck?"

Pretending to panhandle made the process even more degrading, but any other opening gambit ran the risk of the potential prey bolting.

"Sure, buddy. Hang on a sec."

The old count licked his lips as the young man reached into his shoulder bag. As hungry as he was, he knew he would not be able to drain this slim, frail boy dry. He wanted to. He had just enough fellow-feeling left to prefer to give his victims the gift of death rather than the curse of vampirism. But he knew if he consumed all ten pints he'd be jumping in and out of his coffin all day having to pee — or more likely holding the chamber pot and wishing to hell he *could* pee.

Silently damning his prostate — and praying the Poli-Grip held — the old count sank his fangs into the young man's neck.

Ahimsa Green hesitated for a moment before stepping into the dark alley.

It was a shortcut, but that was the only thing good you could say about it. It smelled like a Port-a-Potty and it was darker than a vivisectionist's heart.

Oh well, he thought, steeling his courage and stepping in, faint heart never won fairly pissed-off lady.

Kim had been cold ever since she'd caught him indulging in a little harmless flirting with Ingrid at the anti-fur rally. And that was a very dry kiss she'd given him when he left the apartment that evening. But Ahimsa knew the weather was going to change in a big way when he got home more than an hour late.

At least we got a lot of things accomplished at the meeting tonight, he told himself as he maneuvered around a shiny pile of broken glass shards. The circus — that barbaric holdover from the middle ages when slavery was a way of life — was coming to town. But they probably weren't

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going to like the welcome PAWS had planned for them. Almost everyone had signed up to do some time on the picket line. There were plenty of people willing to brave the cold and hand out Dumbo-in-chains pamphlets at ticket outlets all over town. It took just a bit longer to get volunteers for the guerrilla theatre production — understandable since it required one to spend some time naked in a cage hoping that Ivan, who fancied himself the Olivier of the A-R movement, didn't get carried away with that whip of his.

They'd even had a guest speaker, an entomologist from FSU. He had done a series of experiments proving that given a choice mosquitoes would prefer not to bite vegetarians, though he was at a loss to explain why this was so. Ahimsa could have told the man it was because mosquitoes are attracted to the smell of rotted flesh and putrid blood, which vegheads naturally lack. But he sounded to himself like he was moving into that condescending-to-carnivores mode Kim ragged him about, and he knew he needed to lose that attitude before he got home.

Well, the pesto-marinated tempeh kebabs had been delicious. Not to mention the soy shakes and the —

Oh, goodness! A homeless person stepped out into Ahimsa's path. It startled him so badly he didn't hear what the poor soul said. But he knew the basics. He'd heard it before.

"Sure, buddy. Hang on a second. I know I've got a fiver in here somewhere."

Ahimsa reached around for his shoulder bag to give the man a few dollars. He used to carry fresh fruit to give to needy street people until a couple of them demonstrated their disappointment by flinging the pears and apples at him. A lot of his fellow animal rights activists didn't really give a rip about two-legged animals. But Ahimsa was not like that. He always tried to help everybody who asked him. The name he had chosen for himself demanded no less.

But when the elderly transient grabbed his arm with surprising strength, shoved him hard up against the cold brick wall and sank something sharp into his neck, Ahimsa couldn't help feeling that this was taking charity way too far.

The old count was up wide awake shortly after noon. But it wasn't

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because his bladder was full or his belly was empty. He was excited, too excited to go back to sleep.

And with good reason. For the first time since the early days of Queen Victoria's reign he had awoken with an erection. A majestic one. A real pajama ripper. Even though it was the middle of the day, he just had to throw back the coffin lid to admire it.

After it subsided he could not abide the thought of wasting his entire day, lying around in a musty old casket. His basement apartment had no windows, and he reckoned he could move around the place without much real danger of being struck by a sunbeam.

So he puttered around the apartment. He made tea, he rearranged his books. He fed Rathbone, the blind dingo he tried to pass off as a wolfhound. He searched in vain for some sign of life in his only potted plant, a Venus fly trap. He considered fixing himself a cocktail but decided to wait.

As soon as dusk descended, Lorinda dropped by. Lorinda was the closest thing the old count had to a girlfriend. She was a young thing, just a decade or two over two hundred. But the one time they had fooled around, the old count had put his hand down her shirt — then further down, all the way to her waist without getting anywhere near a nipple. Time takes its toll even on the young vampiric body.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten what tonight is?" Lorinda said in response to the old count's puzzled reception. "It's Saturday night. And there's a full moon. We're going to hook up with Mordred and Horace and raise a little hell."

The old count sighed. Back in the good old days he used to spend his Saturday nights in ballrooms, in palaces, amongst royalty and beautiful virgins and world-class bons vivants like Voltaire and Oscar Wilde. Now all he had to look forward to was "raising hell" with a gray-haired hag in stretch polyester pants and her pair of cronies, one of them surly and the other senile.

It was unlikely but possible that somebody would be raising some hell tonight in this small Florida town. (The old count and his followers had long since left the great cities of Europe and America to escape the cold weather and the crime.) But if Old Nick's realm was waiting for this pathetic quartet to handle the job, forget it. A bunch of old coots out looking for easy-access arteries did not strike the old count as being

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particularly hellish. Really it just seemed four times as pitiful as hanging out all alone in an alley.

Tonight they ended up driving Horace's old Chevy Malibu out into the country. None of them felt like cruising the city after last weekend when they'd been pulled over and ticketed for driving too slow and for "improper use of a turn indicator." (They might have gotten off with a warning, but Mordred had to argue with the deputy that the turn signal was correct because eventually they were going to turn left.)

They found an old isolated farmhouse and peeked hopefully into the window, but the homeowner was disgustingly robust and there seemed to be no aged grandparents, small children, or crippled spouses on the premises. They had about resigned themselves to heading back home, looking for fresh roadkill all the way, when they heard a low moan. In the field behind them was a cow, her udder dried up and useless.

"Still a lotta blood left in that bag of bones, I'll wager," Mordred whispered.

Horace emerged from his Alzheimer's haze long enough to mumble something about bovine hemoglobin giving him diarrhea.

"Oh yeah? I suppose you have a better idea, oh mister mighty hunter?" Mordred challenged.

Horace shook his head.

"No. No, I didn't say it was a bad idea. I haven't had diarrhea in over a fortnight."

Mordred crept to the car and returned with four crowbars. They had tried to kill a cow before and never succeeded, but they had gotten close enough to keep trying. It would have been different if any of them could still do the old turn-yourself-into-mist trick or the bat thing with any degree of certainty. Bashing livestock with tire irons lacked panache.

"Remember this time," Mordred said to Horace as he handed him his weapon, "cows have four legs; I on the other hand have two."

The bloodthirsty cattle-hunters huddled up behind a row of salt licks and waited. But when their intended victim, an unsuspecting Guernsey, moseyed by, the old count jumped up and yelled at her.

"Flee! Get away from here, you stupid fat bitch."

Bessie bolted. The old count watched her go with an empty feeling in his stomach.

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"What in hell did you do that for?" Mordred yelled. "Are you out of your damn mind?"

The old count couldn't explain why he had run the animal off. Something in her soft brown eyes. Something in the memory of his morning tumescence. Something he knew his friends would never understand. How could they? He didn't understand it himself.

He just shrugged his shoulders.

The others made him walk home.

"*All* of this stuff — all of your self-righteous, I'm-so-pure-let-me-tell-you-what-you-should-eat-and-think crap — better be out of my home and out of my yard by the time I get back," Kim said as she slammed the door, kicked over a box of Murder King stickers, and stalked off toward the driveway. "And you with it, Broccoli Boy."

"But, honey, baby," Ahimsa started, willing himself with great effort not to give chase to the fluttering fast food defacements, "where are you going?"

"I am going to get a triple bacon cheeseburger, French fries cooked in lard, and a big glass of...of Clamato juice to wash it down. And I'm going to demand that all of it be tested on animals first, poured in their defenseless little eyes *while I watch*! Then I'm going to start scrubbing your useless vegan ass out of my system and I don't care how much cholesterol I have to ingest or how many little bunnies have to die for me to do it."

And pausing only long enough to pull a black Magic Marker out of her purse and scribble over the A HAMBURGER STOPS A BEATING HEART bumper sticker on Ahimsa's Hyundai, and scrawl "Got Meat?" on the driver's side door, she was gone.

Ahimsa couldn't really blame her.

It's hard for a jealous woman to accept when her fiancé comes home at six A.M. from a People and Animals Working to end Suffering meeting that started at nine P.M. Especially when his response to her query "Just where in the goddamned hell have you been for the last nine hours?" was "I'm sorry; I really don't know."

But even then he probably could have sweet-talked and plea-bargained his way into a sentence of only a week or two in the doghouse

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if that had been the worst of it. You add a vicious-looking purple hickey on his neck that he was unable to account for the presence of, and Ahimsa knew he was lucky just to be alive.

Still he hated to lose her, and if he wasn't so worn out all of a sudden he'd go after her and beg for another chance.

Food. That was what he needed.

Instinctively, Ahimsa headed for The Crepes of Wrath, intent on a black bean blintz, his ultimate comfort food.

But when he was seated at his favorite booth, sipping his mango-ginseng smoothie and perusing the menu he'd already memorized, he realized he wasn't hungry.

Yes he was. He must be. That growling noise was definitely emanating from his abdomen.

But he wasn't hungry for anything they served here.

THIRTY-ONE POUNDS.

The old count had lost thirty-one pounds. He'd had to dig all of his too-skinny-clothes out of the bottom of the armoire. Now when he lay in his coffin he actually had room to turn over. He wasn't forced to lie on his aching coffinsore-covered backside all night long.

He had lots more energy too. It had to be because he had changed his diet from red to green. Now he ate spinach and collards and kale, green peas — oh, he loved green peas — frozen not canned, the canned ones tasted gray like the can — and salads with dandelion and mesclun greens. At first it didn't satisfy the hunger in his belly but it tasted so good in the mouth — that crisp green chlorophylly zing that tasted like the first day of Spring felt, back in the days — those increasingly nostalgic days — when the old count could still get out and experience a Spring day.

Sometimes he still wanted blood but not the way he used to get it, not if he had to hurt anybody to get it. He actually found himself wishing he could go to church and have a taste of that blood that the Son of Man offered up so freely.

He also found himself — because he mentioned this heretical idea in front of Mordred — ousted as leader of his conclave. From clan leader to caitiff. Even Rathbone had run away from home. Not that he cared. His

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vampire friends were beginning to creep him out. The thought of sucking blood from a living person made him slightly sick to his stomach.

He was sleeping more at night now, but in the evenings he enjoyed going out among the humans. He went to the movies — *Babe* and *My Dog Skip* made him cry. Once he went out to the public library. He was looking for a good vegetable cookbook, but also over in the new non-fiction section he'd stumbled across Doctor Neil Lowenstein's *A New Understanding of Nosferatu.*

Dr. Lowenstein's book advanced the theory that vampires consumed blood because, being undead, they consequently lacked the essential life force, what the Hindus call prana and the Japanese call chi.

Another book — *Yoga for Absolute Knuckleheads* — said that yogis could obtain this prana stuff directly from the air. The old count was a skeptic, had been a skeptic since back in the days when his old buddy Thomas Hobbes had been an optimist. But on reading this, something stirred in his long-dead heart.

The old count was so excited he hurried home. He sat on the floor, briefly attempted to cross his legs until the arthritis and the phlebitis talked him out of it, and set out to find his chakras. After all these years he wasn't sure if he still had chakras (most of his nonessential organs — gall bladder, spleen, appendix, tonsils, and testicles — had long since turned to dust) but he was willing to search for them.

Closing his eyes and visualizing a spinning wheel of energy at the base of his spine, the old count took a deep breath.

Ahimsa did not believe he had a problem.

Yes, he was homeless, sleeping on the couch of AL Williams and his boyfriend Hugo. (The name on AL's driver's license was Animal Liberation Williams, but he no longer had to work to get the media's attention, and these days he usually just went by the initials.)

And yes, Ahimsa was lying to these friends who had been kind enough to take him in. Lying to them every day. Not about Kim, he told them everything he knew about that situation (they both smiled knowingly when he said he didn't know where the hickey came from), but about how much he enjoyed their portobello burgers and their butternut risotto and indeed about how committed he was to the cause of veganism and ending animal enslavement.

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That was only natural, wasn't it? A guy goes through a separation he starts to question everything, to examine his life. It's part of the process of redefining oneself.

And if Ahimsa was doing most of his redefining in restaurants, well so what? When he ordered that first slice of pizza with what he still thought of as cow-udder-pus instead of soy cheese it was an experiment. It's just dairy. Milk not blood. His reasoning was hey, nobody had to die for me to have this.

But then he snuck into a Chik-fil-A, and it wasn't just for waffle fries, although that was what he planned to tell anybody who recognized him. (Forgetting altogether that waffle fries by themselves would have been hard enough to explain.)

Then it was back to Pizza Shack, but this time for a Meat Lover's deluxe. And then it was on to steak houses for increasingly rarer slabs of cow. It was getting expensive. He wouldn't cook death in AL and Hugo's pans, so he had to go out most every night. And he lived in constant dread of being discovered on one of these carnivorous quests.

He thought about calling Kim. They could go out for a burger together now like "normal people." If nothing else, he had certainly eliminated that gigantic bone of contention. But he just couldn't say out loud — except to faceless waiters — that he wanted to consume the flesh of innocent creatures.

Then one morning while shaving he cut his chin. He wasn't thinking about what he was doing. He was debating whether to have links or patties for breakfast. A teardrop of blood appeared. Still without thinking, Ahimsa reached out, scooped up the blood with his index finger, popped the finger in his mouth and sucked it down.

His eyes closed with pleasure and he sighed contentedly. That one drop appeared to be all he was going to get. His blood was already beginning to clot. Without thinking about what he was doing, he picked up a nail file Kim had left behind and jabbed it deep into his forearm, then held his arm up to his face and greedily sucked down the resultant red fluid.

Catching sight of himself in the mirror, Ahimsa was forced to admit that it was possible he might have a problem after all.

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The church clock showed two minutes till twelve. And not the vampire twelve — the other one. Noon. A warm sunny noon.

It wasn't only his genitals and his taste buds and other long-dormant body parts the old count was rediscovering. He'd also gotten in touch with long-dead parts of his soul. Mostly his conscience. It kept riding him and reminding him of all the murders he had committed. All the blood he had shed. Innocent blood. Though it was driving him mad, he could not stop thinking about all the murders he had committed. (Well, not *all* of the murders he had committed. Even with his brain cells whizzing along on ginkgo biloba, there was no way to remember ten thousand necks.)

The old count wondered briefly why the sight of the cross on the church didn't churn his stomach, then he went back to struggling with an unfamiliar emotion. Fear. He knew he had to go out into the sunlight and he knew it was going to kill him. And he knew it was going to be a slow painful process.

But he also knew that this time he would succeed. When he'd attempted solar suicide before it had been because he was tired, tired mostly of the long nights and hard work involved with being a fiend of hell. And fatigue quickly capitulates in the face of great pain. But now the old count's motivation was self-loathing. He hated himself for what he was, for all the suffering and heartbreak and death he had caused.

It would all end today.

The church clock struck twelve.

The old count stepped out of the alley and into the full sunshine. No hat, no sunglasses, no protection. He welcomed the fire.

He didn't know how to pray and didn't really feel a need to communicate with any celestial beings, but he did mumble "I'm sorry." His last words.

At least they should have been his last words. But for some reason the deadly solar rays were not burning him alive. They seemed to have no effect on him at all.

No, that wasn't true. The rays did have an effect. They felt...they felt like that first hot geyser of blood at the back of his throat, only now it felt like that not just in his mouth but all over his body.

The old count opened his eyes and slowly came out of his cringe. He peered down at his hands, his arms, his legs. All whole and unsinged.

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"What the — ?"

He turned his face up toward the heavens. He was not on fire. He was...he was warm, that's what he was. And Jesus, it felt good to be warm.

He threw off his shawl. It felt like the sun was melting the centuries off his body. The old count could actually feel himself growing younger, stronger, more alive.

The old count felt a faint, familiar rhythm, and it took him a minute or two to trace it to its source — the middle of his chest. For the first time in almost five centuries, the old count's heart was beating.

"Oh God, it's a miracle!" the old count shouted, frightening more than a few lunchtime pedestrians. "I'm not undead! I'm not a vampire. I'm human just like you — and you — and you!"

A police officer riding by on a motorcycle gave the count a menacing glare, but he didn't care. He felt so good, so alive and so happy to be alive he started dancing right there in the street. Dancing and laughing and crying and singing "You Are My Sunshine" all at once.

In the shadows, clad in a torn "Respect animals, don't eat them" T-shirt, the young vampire squinted against the sun.

He was through denying what he was, through feeling pity for the weak. He was a member of the master race now and he was ready to start acting like one. He was going to kill somebody and drink their blood — every delicious drop. And he was going to enjoy it very much.

But who would have the honor of becoming his first kill? Someone who wouldn't put up much of a fight; that damned sun was sapping all his strength.

As if in answer to a demonic prayer a crazy old man came dancing down the street.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

POST-APOCALYPTIC LOVE TRIANGLES, AND OTHER THINGS THAT WON'T FIT ON A T-SHIRT

COME THE apocalypse, or our own personal cataclysmic disaster, we'd all like to think that we would face it gallantly. No whining or cowardice, just calm, resolute bravery. The blue planet has, so far, avoided a nuclear conflagration or a cataclysmic meteor strike. But there was a recent event that made many Earthlings of the American persuasion wonder whether they could discover their better selves, even as their world tumbled down around them.

The press coverage of 9/11 tried to comfort us with stories that reinforced our hope of redemptive nobility. There weren't enough miraculous rescues to go around that day. But at least there were plenty of stories of valor and altruism.

The other form of consolation the media tried to offer us was to give villainy a face. Widespread cultural/political/religious hatred involving millions of just-plain-folks was too difficult for most citizens to wrap their brains around. Better to offer Americans a focal enemy — a single demonic foe. After all, you can put Osama bin Laden's face on a T-shirt.

I think that's why so many apocalyptic fantasy films, like Ahnuld's disastrous *End of Days* (1999), actually have the hero doing battle with the Devil. (The fatal flaw in many of these movies lies in the fact that the Devil, especially when personified by a talented and handsome actor like *End of Days*'s Gabriel Byrne, is actually much more compelling and personable than the hero. Ouch!)

Then there are the apocalyptic movies *(The Last Man on Earth, Omega Man)* that give a holocaust survivor "hero" a chance to do battle

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with bands of living dead types. When it's hordes of zombies you're up against, the enemy is more diffuse, but at least there *is* an enemy.

We want to be able to take action. There's a reason Todd Beamer's announcement, "Let's Roll," is the stuff of legend and pop songs.

One of the finest end-of-the-world movies ever made is actually 1983's *Testament*, starring Jane Alexander. But no one wants to watch a movie like that! It's too depressing. In *Testament*, set in the aftermath of a nuclear war, all the good-hearted citizenry can do is maintain normalcy the best they can, be kind to one another, watch their nearest and dearest die, and wait for their own demise. Ms. Alexander's mom hero is every bit as brave as any action hero, but she has nothing she can fight against. Her gallantry is passive and hopeless. Such a story may make a worthwhile political statement, and it may even make for haunting filmcraft, but it is *not* entertainment.

In some ways, the indie first feature, *The Last Man*, is an even more daring exercise in giving audiences exactly what they don't want. For in this particular end-of-the-world dramedy, written and directed by Harry Ralston, there is no ghoulish foe for the movie's protagonist to fight against. And if there were, we feel certain that Alan, a neurotic anthropologist, would turn tail and run, rather than face it down.

Alan (courageously played, often in little more than his Fruit of the Looms, by David Arnott) isn't a bad person. He is simply weak, selfish, socially awkward, and physically unremarkable. He's a putz, and not a particularly endearing one.

As the film opens, Alan is strolling down a sun-dappled sidewalk in California. He stops to look in a shop widow at the latest video camera equipment. He considers the display for a moment, then he starts pitching flower pots into the storefront. As the burglar alarm blares, he puts his equipment selections in his cart and strolls away. Only then do we realize how quiet the street is. The few other people in the scene are, we see, all dead.

Later, Alan sets up his video and explains as much as he knows, for the benefit of future visitors who might want to learn more about the end of mankind. There seems to have been some unseen neutron blast, germ weapon, or other plague let loose on Earth. As far as he knows, he is the last survivor. And, all in all, he seems content to be so.

Alan, we feel certain, was never

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much of a success as a social animal. But now that he is alone, he can pontificate, at length and on camera, about an obscure Amazonian tribe he has studied, and unabashedly take center stage as the star of his world.

All this ends when a beautiful young woman stumbles upon him in the middle of a tribal cleansing ceremony involving mud and masturbation. First impressions aside, Sarah (Jeri Ryan — yes, we are talking *Star Trek: Voyager*'s "Seven of Nine") seems eager to cling to Alan for human interaction. It's like he died and went to heaven! This last man finally has the attention of a beautiful woman — the kind of gorgeous female who wouldn't have looked twice at his pudgy, balding self on a crowded city street.

Harry Ralston could have done some standard romantic comedy shtick in his debut film. Instead, he chooses to do something a little edgier (and much more honest). Rather than have Alan and Sarah fall happily and effortlessly in love, both flawed characters stay true to themselves. Which is to say, they remain throughout the movie a very improbable couple, indeed. They attempt to negotiate sex and other forms of intimacy with one another, and do so rather poorly.

At first, Sarah seems to view her relations with Alan as some elaborate form of penance for her previously fickle ways. Appeasing an angry God is not, perhaps, the best basis of a love connection. Still, Alan seems willing to take it any way he can get it. That is, until Sarah accepts her fate and decides to throw herself into their relationship. The clingier she gets, the more Alan recoils. Can this "marriage" be saved? Only by the lack of viable alternatives.

Suddenly, Sarah has one. Another survivor is discovered along the road. And, wouldn't you know, he is a lean, handsome hunk with a romantic name. Raphael (Dan Montgomery) isn't an intellectual giant, but he sure looks good in a pair of shorts. Moreover, Raphael is as laid-back as Alan is uptight. Before long, Alan can't keep up his cheery denial. Raphael is winning the only available female. Alan appears doomed to be odd man out in a very small society.

Like a grungy, existential episode of MTV's *Dismissed*, this film is a dating game gone seriously wrong. Early on, Alan tells his video camera that he suspects the apocalypse resulted when "someone didn't get loved — so they got even." And you might expect *The Last*

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Man to descend into something just as ugly, if on a smaller scale. It almost does, but to the last, Alan's personality is consistent. He is who he is, whether it makes for sufficiently hilarious or dramatic viewing or not.

Post-apocalyptic love triangles are a tricky proposition. It helps when the situations and the personalities manage to keep the viewer guessing. While watching *The Last Man*, an even darker fantasy film came to mind. *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) was also a torn-between-two-lovers kinda tale, set in the years after the quick, civilization-obliterating conclusion of WW IV. Filthy, brutal men roam the Arizona desert, searching for canned food to devour, and human females to rape and murder. Among them, a young man named Vic (Where have you gone, Don Johnson?) who is never far from his trusted companion and intellectual superior, a pooch called Blood (voiced by Tim McIntyre).

Vic and Blood are mates for life. But what happens when a nubile young woman — just too sexually desirable to simply defile and disembowel — enters the picture? Quilla June (Susanne Benton), a temptress with her own agenda, is such a woman. And she threatens to break up the beautiful relationship between a canine and his human.

A Boy and His Dog, written and directed by L. Q. Jones from a novella by our hero, Harlan Ellison, is a (sometimes literally) dark, often ferociously witty, and totally bizarre fantasy with a shocking but quite logical conclusion. These days, it is usually called a cult movie, which presumably means that those who have been exposed to it become religiously attached. Certainly it is as far from the same-old same-old as you can get.

The Last Man can't match *A Boy and His Dog*'s power to entertain or outrage because it pursues normalcy (i.e., recognizable interpersonal dysfunction) in the face of catastrophe. Mr. Ralston seems to be saying that come the Judgment Day, people are likely to be the same as any other day. We won't be courageous and ennobled, nor will we degenerate into zombie monsters, or savages ruled by our physical appetites, and nothing more. We will simply be the neurotic or needy or clueless humans we've always been — only now there'll be fewer people around to witness our foolishness.

I suspect that Harry is right. Still, I might have wished for less

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honest insight and more unexpected plot twists. Or at least a few more giggles and guffaws. (This is a movie, not a life lesson, after all.) The narrative device of the Alan's video journal also needlessly slows down the film, pulling us away from the real action and distancing us too often from two thirds of this particular love triangle.

The Last Man is nonetheless an interesting first feature from a filmmaker who shows considerable promise. Chances are, most of you won't get the chance to see this one in theaters, since Castle Hill will be giving it only limited distribution. But a video release is also planned. Seek it out. And, at the same time, why not try to track down the DVD of *A Boy and His Dog*?

As for the possibility of facing disaster with calm, resolute bravery? At least these two films might make you feel a little better about your own chances.

"Do you mind? It's for me."

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Rod Garcia first introduced us to the world of Markovy in "The Iron Wood" (Aug. 2000) and returned to it in "Death in Love" (Jan. 2002). No need to reread those stories in order to follow the compelling action here, but if a name or two sounds familiar, you'll know where you encountered them before. Mr. Garcia's work usually takes us places we've never been. With this new story, someone who knows the intimate secrets of Haram life will have to notify us if there were any errors made here.

Princess Aria

By R. Garcia y Robertson

The Red Stair

SEAMSTRESSES RACED DEATH to sew Aria into her cloth-of-silver gown. Female dwarves stitched the hems. Ladies-in-waiting did the sleeves and bodice. Pearl trim, silver pins, and ermine scraps lay strewn about the carpeted floor. Fingers and needles worked frantically over Aria's body — but not fast enough. She stood half-dressed when a flustered maidservant burst into the tower chamber, announcing an armored messenger. He came a heartbeat behind her, giving Aria no time to cover up. Knowing fear would surely kill her, she assumed a superior air, frowning at the man's muddy boots.

He stood and gawked. Young and nobly bred, he had never set foot in the Haram before, and never realized that an unmarried princess wore nothing under her closest fitting dresses.

She let him look, standing hip deep in dwarves, draped in long black hair and cloth-of-silver, with one white thigh bared to the hip. Hopefully

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it would give him courage. Young men did things out of desire that neither gold nor duty could move them to do. Collecting himself, the startled blond lordling dropped to one knee, assuming the self-important eagerness of a man with bad tidings. "Your Highness, I am Lord Valad d'Hay. I bring grave news."

"And ruin to my Barbary rugs." Which were brilliant pieces, hand woven with golden thread, having come half a year by caravan. Aria motioned to her women. "Take off his boots."

Serving women sprang to obey, happy to lay hands on handsome young Lord d'Hay. Nothing distracts a man in armor like smiling young females bending down and seizing his legs. D'Hay rose awkwardly, stammering out his message as her women lifted one leg, then the other, tugging off his heavy cavalry boots. "Prince Akavarr has come. With his boyars. And in armor."

"As are you," Aria reminded him. He wore the half-armor of a light horseman — gorget, cuirass, steel gauntlets, mail sleeves, and plate tassets on his thighs.

"And armed," d'Hay added gravely.

"Naturally." He might as well have said they were wearing pants. No boyar would so much as stagger drunk to the privy without some sort of edged steel at hand — not willingly, at least. It was what separated them from serfs. Common Markovites could own nothing more dangerous than pitchforks and carving knives. Boyars had swords and armor and armed retainers, and the power of pit and gallows — they would be running the country if they were not so stark raving stupid. Ever since she was a girl — when her mother was put away and she started following her father about — Aria had been surrounded by overarmed men. As a child she moved among swords and dirks belted at her eye level, knowing half the men who wore them wished her dead. Unnerving, but Aria had learned to live with it.

"The guards at the Bishop's Gate have gone over to him. They will be here within the hour."

Aria sighed. Her voice could be musical, even when scared. Her foreign-sounding name meant "song" in the forbidden language of the opera. "And they expect an audience?"

"Highness, Prince Akavarr means to take you."

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"Impossible." She tilted her dark head to let him get the full effect. Maids adjusted her ermine mantle. "Today is Saint Zelda's Day, devoted to prayer and repentance, so I may see no one. Please, tell him so."

Dwarf seamstresses tittered, still sewing furiously. D'Hay stared in disbelief as serving women handed him his boots. He bowed and left, in clanking half-armor and stocking feet.

She turned back to her women, saying with pretended seriousness, "I fear we will have to feed young Lord d'Hay to the horses."

Giggling broke the tension, and everyone worked all the faster for having someone to laugh at. Just getting dressed to die was horribly time-consuming; each piece of the gown fit so perfectly it had to be sewn on. Such a gown came off the same way, one piece at a time. For a noblewoman to conduct an affair she needed more than bravery and a willing gallant; successful adultery demanded the services of a clever maid, a discreet seamstress, and a dwarf to stand lookout. Everything Aria did required a change of costume, a silk chemise to sleep in, a surcoat and sable mantle for the morning, a riding dress if she went out, a green-and-gold gown for supper, purple or cloth-of-silver for state occasions, red damask for evening wear. If Prince Akavarr meant to have her executed, that too must be dressed for, a black gown with crimson lining if it was to be a beheading, a plain linen shift if she was burned alive. An informal strangling or suffocation would be come-as-you-are.

Ladies of the chamber placed the royal tiara on her head just as Lord d'Hay returned — this time carrying his boots. "Your Highness, Prince Akavarr and his boyars are inside. The palace guards gave way to them."

Aria motioned her dwarves aside, saying, "What do you think?"

D'Hay looked puzzled — not expecting to be consulted in a crisis. "Your Highness should call out the Gendarmes of the Guard. Backed by the Kazaks, they could hold the Red Stairs until...."

Aria smiled at d'Hay's sincerity, studying him in a serving girl's mirror. Boys like him, so in love with honor and bravery, renewed her faith in men. "I mean what do you think of my gown?"

He gaped like a hooked sturgeon, his boots hanging limply at his side. "Stunning, Your Highness. Truly stunning." Aria saw he meant it.

"Good." She grinned into the mirror. "You may go."

D'Hay obeyed. Her women giggled again as he left, having marked the

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boy down as bold and amorous. Aria felt fortified, glad he approved of her gown. Male approval meant everything today — literally a life or death matter. And sometimes all men seemed to care about was her clothes, and how she looked in them. And how to get them off her — never caring about her thoughts or feelings. Women, even princesses, were ignorant, sinful, vessels for making babies, immune to education and prone to promiscuity — hence the Haram. Certainly no one asked her opinion on foreign affairs, Church reform, or the uncertain future of Markovy.

Now Prince Akavarr meant to take any such weighty matters entirely out of her hands, and an impending coup d'état was at least as important as a court reception. All her ladies of the chamber, indeed her whole household down to the pantry girls and candle bearers, were dressed in black and silver for the occasion, to match her hair and gown. Sable et argent, elegant yet solemn, her personal colors. The Haram was a woman's castle, and finery her armor. Now that castle faced a siege, and Aria meant to confront her foes looking like she stepped down off of a cloud, not like she crawled out from behind a couch.

She left her private apartments, followed by her handmaids. Shafts of morning sun filtered through the Haram's narrow light wells, leaded windows, and arabesque screens. Live birds flitted through the halls and doorways, singing in alarm. Dwarves peeked around corners as they passed. Each hallway had its own color scheme; one would be royal blue, with sky-colored carpets, and turquoise tapestries bordered with cornflowers, while the next would be dark red, with burgundy hangings, alcove candles, and carpets colored with dragon's blood.

Bishop Peter Petrovich of Markov waited at the Silken Door, dressed as befits a Prince of the Church in purple robes and golden miter. He carried a tall gold and steel bishop's crosier heavy enough to use as a club. For a seventy-year-old eunuch, Bishop Peter was still full of divine fire, ready to stand by Aria at the death. She bowed before him, feeling Bishop Peter's hand on her head, just as when she was little. He called her daughter — the only one who did so now that her father was dead. "Kneel before Heaven, daughter, and confess your sins."

Instantly she was ten again; only the sins had changed. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I have not lied or blasphemed since my last confession. Nor have I fornicated, but I lusted after a man in my heart. And

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this morning a man saw my thigh. I skipped prayers two bedtimes in a row, and I played at magic, seeking to see my future in cards. I listened to profane music and was moved to dance. Also I cursed Prince Akavarr several times in my heart, though only Heaven heard me."

Women whispered behind her while she waited for absolution, wondering who she lusted after. Bishop Peter lifted his hand, signing in the air above her head. "Rise, my daughter, and be blessed. You face penance enough for your sins."

Perhaps. Chastity and prayer had not forestalled Prince Akavarr, but they let her face him with a lighter heart. No matter what she had done, no matter what lies were told about her, Aria did not feel sinful. She lied when she had to — but that could not be helped. And she never understood why music and dancing were mortal sins, while getting beastly drunk and whipping the clothes off serving girls or setting fire to a dwarf were harmless pastimes. The ways of the Almighty were ever a mystery — especially to her. But she was grateful for confession, which always made her feel cleansed. She rose and kissed the Bishop's fleshy hand, asking, "Is my brother here?"

Priests produced Prince Ivan, her small blond six-year-old half-brother. Being a boy, and heir to the throne, his surcoat was cloth-of-gold. She took her half-brother's hand, saying, "Send for Sister Karinana." If the family faced death, they would do it together.

Bishop Peter walked before her, holding his crosier and swinging a censer, blessing the path ahead. Ivan clung to her hand, terrified, though he had the least to fear. Prince Akavarr would happily slaughter the lot of them just to lay hands on Ivan — but try to explain that to a frightened child.

D'Hay appeared again, out of breath from going back and forth in armor. He knelt before the Bishop, touching his forehead, then knelt again before Aria and Prince Ivan. "Highnesses, they are at the foot of the Red Stairs — the Gendarmes of the Guard have not stopped them."

Aria nodded; that was what came of not giving herself to her guard captain. She thanked d'Hay, saying he should stand aside. She did not want young d'Hay throwing himself away in some futile attempt to defend her. "Wait for us here. Though I know that shall be hard for you."

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D'Hay rose, looking like he might not do it; then his gaze dropped and he stepped back. "As you say, m'lady, it will be hard."

M'lady? Here is a bold boy. What became of "Your Highness?" Bare a bit of thigh in a crisis and suddenly she was m'lady. At least he still obeyed. Ever since she was little, people had done what she wanted, when she wanted it. Her greatest terror was that the power to command was about to be taken away, and after today people would no longer do as she said. She would become an ordinary woman — to be ordered about, whipped and set to work, then forced into marriage or a nunnery as occasion demanded. Aria would far rather be dead.

Fear clutched her heart as she approached the Red Stairs. Some game idiot had called out her guard — d'Hay perhaps. Small good that would do. Kazak bowmen crowded the porch at the head of the stairs, smelling of sweat and spoiled butter, gripping their composite bows; unable to speak a civilized tongue, they would not know whom to shoot. The Gendarmes of the Guard were drawn up at the foot of the stairs in their silver-chased armor, but by now they were bound to be under Prince Akavarr's spell. Aria could not imagine them turning their poleaxes against a prince of the blood, backed by dozens of boyars, not unless she gave them some incredibly good reason.

Gargoyles crouched on the balcony rail, staring down at the open audience hall two full stories beneath them. Looking past their stone faces into the hall below, all she saw at first were bared blades — the boyars' drawn swords, the Gendarmes' poleaxes, and the guards' halberds. A hedge of edged steel seemed to fill the audience hall, bright and terrifying. Kings had died on these stairs — including her great-grandfather, thrown over the balcony rail onto the pikes of rioting peasants. Legend had it that the steps were carpeted with red so as not to show blood.

Hisses rose from below, along with shouts of "witch" and "whore" — it took a moment to realize that they meant her. Standing still as a silver statue at the head of the Red Stairs, Aria fought to cast out fear. Fear eroded you, making you plain and ordinary, and Aria wanted there to be nothing ordinary about her. That was why she stood before her enemies wearing a gown worth more than most Markovites saw in a lifetime, yet looking nearly naked, every curve exposed by cloth-of-silver. Beneath her silver, ermine, and pearls, was her mortal body — a woman's body, weak and

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willful — covered by a gown costing ten thousand ducats, topped with a diamond tiara worth a queen's ransom.

Prince Akavarr stepped up on the stairs, wearing half-armor and a mail cowl. Blocked by Bishop Peter swinging his censer, the prince called up to her, "Come down, harlot."

Boyars began to chant, "Jez-e-bel, Jez-e-bel, Jez-e-bel...." Calling her by the name of the witch-queen in the Book of Kings. Aria stared hard at the harsh bearded faces of the men who had destroyed her mother. Akavarr was her uncle, her father's half-brother, barred from the throne for being a bastard, but still an old-time prince of the blood, big, bearded and unwashed, who ate with his hands, drank with his boyars, and hated her with all his heart. He had never reconciled himself to his half-brother's foreign marriage — to a wife who refused to hide in the Haram, who dared bring minstrels and play-acting to the palace. And he never saw the need for a niece who dared to share her mother's looks and disposition.

When ten years of frivolous marriage produced only a daughter, Akavarr led the boyars in demanding that Aria's mother be set aside. Father capitulated. Her mother was sent off with shaved head, to live on bread and water in a White Sea convent. "Let her dance and frolic to four stone walls," Akavarr sneered. Father then married a God-fearing girl from a good boyar family. Years passed. Aria grew up. Finally Father's second marriage produced a living son — little Prince Ivan cowering behind her. Having gotten an heir, Father promptly packed his second wife off to a convent, and recalled Aria's mother, enraging his boyars.

Aria had been ecstatic, staying up all night, running her hands through her mother's short graying hair, exchanging memories of the years they had missed, then just watching over Mother while she slept. Aria ended up sleeping until noon the next day — but it was worth it. When she got up, her mother was dead, poisoned at breakfast along with her two favorite handmaids. Only Aria's sleeping late had saved her.

Now that both her mother and father were dead, Prince Akavarr meant to complete the task, finishing off her family — if not by outright murder here on the Red Stairs, then by privation in some convent cell, or walled up in a Haram tower. Her mother's foreign blood made Aria hated, but her father's blood condemned her. Once he had Ivan in his hands, Akavarr could not risk her producing another heir.

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She heard old Bishop Peter raising his reedy voice against the multitude, crying, "For shame! For shame!" He stood in front of the armed Prince, shaking his censer. "Why have you violated the sanctity of the palace?"

Taken aback, Prince Akavarr had not expected the reverend Bishop to side with Ivan's wicked half-sister — but he quickly recovered, shouting even louder. "We have come to assure the safety of the heir." He pointed a mailed finger at her. "She means to supplant Prince Ivan with a child of her vice."

Aria stared at the man, thinking he must be entirely mad. Unable to help herself, she laughed aloud, a high musical laugh just like her voice. Scared as she was, Aria could not hide her amusement at remembering all she had gone through to keep from getting with child. Atop the normal fears a young woman felt at having a man possess her, Aria had the certain knowledge that her child would be a prize of state — immediately seized and used to replace her. Any heir of her body was vastly preferable to Aria herself, being more easily manipulated and less tainted by foreign blood; having a daughter would be dangerous; a boy would be her death sentence. Men had cursed the importance she had put on not getting pregnant, and only her status as a princess kept several of them from using violence to overcome her scruples. Laughing high and long at Prince Akavarr's absurd suggestion, she barely believed that her royal uncle had things so utterly wrong.

Her laughter was magical, shattering the tension, giving her sudden courage. Everyone stared at her, boyars, Gendarmes, ladies and priests, guards and dwarves, bewildered Kazaks — all wondering what on earth she had to laugh at. "You think I mean to harm the heir?"

"You know you do," Akavarr shot back.

"Then ask him." She reached behind her and lifted up Ivan in his cloth-of-gold gown. Her tiny terrified half-brother clung hard to her, blue eyes wide, horrified by the scene below.

Men stared back at her, nonplussed. The boyars' whole purpose had been to "protect" the heir, who now clung to his worst enemy, the scheming foreign half-sister who plotted to put her ill-gotten seed upon the throne. And both of them were protected by the Bishop of Markov. What had seemed so simple when Prince Akavarr was marching on the palace turned out to be no easy task.

Baron Tolstoy, a tall, balding, long-nosed boyar with shaggy black

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eyebrows and thin lips, stepped forward. He was Akavarr's brother-in-law and chief supporter, married to the Prince's sister. Leaning past the Bishop, his armor rattling, Tolstoy asked, "How can we know that is really Prince Ivan?"

Aria laughed again. How could he know? Lord Tolstoy had only seen the heir from a distance, on state occasions like her father's funeral. She saw Ivan every day. Since his mother had been put away, Ivan had been brought up by the Haram. As his closest and youngest relative, much of that bringing up had fallen to Aria — much more than she liked when he was an anxious, petulant two-year-old whining for his mother. What an absurdity. After virtually ignoring him since birth, they were asking the evil stepsister, "Is this really our prince?"

Striding boldly down the stairs until she was close enough to smell the beer on Tolstoy's breath, she smiled triumphantly, holding the boy up so the whole hall could hear him. "Tell them your name."

Her boldness and laughter encouraged him. Hiding his tears, he grinned shyly, saying to her, "I am Prince Ivan."

Aria tickled him, making him laugh as well. "Say it louder. For them." She pointed at the men.

The boy looked quickly at Tolstoy, shouting, "I am Prince Ivan." Then he hid back in Aria's arms. She stroked his head, telling the heir to Markovy he had done well.

Bishop Peter brought his crosier down, barring the steps, saying to Tolstoy, "Of course he is the heir. Just as I am patriarch of Markov. By the Grace of God, who did you expect to find in the palace?"

Tolstoy stepped back, stymied. Prince Akavarr pushed past his vacillating brother-in-law, saying, "The heir belongs in our hands."

Aria looked at him, then at the hesitant boyars behind him, and at the uneasy Gendarmes of the Guard. Behind her on the balcony, women in cloth-of-silver stood beside Kazaks in skins and leather. Dwarves perched on the gargoyles. All eyes were on them — which was her sole advantage. Prince Akavarr plotted her mother's death in secret, with just his creatures around him, then he resorted to poison to hide his hand. It was wholly different to seize the heir to the throne in front of God and witnesses. She lifted Ivan up again. "Do you want to stay with me, or go with these men?"

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Ivan shrank back, horrified, grabbing at her arms. "With you, Aria. With you." She took the frightened boy back to her breast, calming and comforting him.

She desperately hoped Akavarr would back down, announce himself satisfied, then retreat to his lair to plot more mischief. Instead she saw him spin about to harangue the wavering boyars. Staring in wonder at his armored back, and listening to his shouts, Aria realized this was foolish of him. Tolstoy had been drinking; probably Akavarr had too, to fortify himself for the coup. He should either have given in, or stormed past the helpless old Bishop with his blade drawn. There are times when men must use either their feet or their swords. Talking for them can be fatal. Aria watched him argue with Tolstoy, upbraiding the reluctant baron, cursing his sister's husband as a coward and worse.

Tolstoy answered haughtily, unused to swallowing insults. Then in an act of absolute lunacy, Akavarr shoved him scornfully, pushing him lightly on the breastplate with the gloved palm of his left hand. There was no flesh to flesh contact, but Aria saw at once it was a terrible mistake. Drunk and excited, Tolstoy instinctively clapped his hand to his sword, which he had sheathed while talking to Ivan, his legal sovereign.

Akavarr's sword was already out. Hitting his brother-in-law in the face with the hilt, he knocked Baron Tolstoy backward onto the stairs. Akavarr stood over the fallen baron, blade bared, staring down at Tolstoy who lay bleeding from the lip. Aria knew her uncle had gone way too far, assaulting one of the Nine Barons, and one of his biggest backers. Did he really mean to kill Baron Tolstoy? Akavarr's own brother-in-law? On his back, with his hands empty? In front of the patriarch and the heir apparent? Even the boyars would be bound to call it murder. Yet if he stepped back, Tolstoy would be up and at him, blade in hand. God alone knew what would come of that.

Giving him no time to think his way out of the impasse, she cried out at the top of her voice, "Treason. Treason. He means to kill Baron Tolstoy."

Her women took up the chant, "Treason. Treason. Treason...." Even Ivan yelled it, "Treason. Treason." A terrible word to shout in that charged situation.

Akavarr gave ground, anxious to defuse the situation. Tolstoy bounded to his feet, drunkenly determined to get blood for blood. Drawing his

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sword, he slashed clumsily at Akavarr. Forced to defend himself, Prince Akavarr parried, trying to make himself heard above the chanting. He batted Tolstoy's sword aside, but dared not strike. Aria could see from his face he wished none of this was happening.

Stumbling backward, Tolstoy tripped on the steps, going down on one knee, crying vigorously for help. Gendarmes suddenly remembered their duty, realizing that they could be called accomplices to Prince Akavarr's treason. Poleaxes lashed out. One clanged off the prince's gorget, slashing him across the jaw. Akavarr groaned and went down, his beard splattered with blood. More blades descended, hacking at his armored body. Once he was down, the Gendarmes knew that it would be best for them if he never got up. Aria hugged Ivan to her, hiding his eyes so he would not see.

Bishop Peter weighed in with his silver crosier, forcing back the Gendarmes. Too late. Prince Akavarr lay slashed and still at the base of the Red Stairs. Chants of "treason" subsided, replaced by shocked silence as brittle as Barbary glass. Saint Zelda's Day would be long remembered.

Aria turned and took Ivan back up past the ladies and Kazaks on the balcony, past the dwarves straddling the gargoyles, headed for the Haram — trying to put distance between herself and what had happened. Prince Akavarr came looking for death and found it — but no good would come of this. When the boyars looked about for someone to blame, they were bound to remember her.

D'Hay stood waiting where she had told him to stay, shifting from foot to foot. Pleased at his impatient obedience, she released him, saying, "Take charge of the Gendarmes — you are their new captain. See there is no more killing."

He bowed happily, bounding off to do her will. The boy showed promise, and she badly needed loyal young blades, having hardly anyone to trust — and enemies aplenty. Akavarr was only the most eager and bloodthirsty, but the most brainless drunken boyar could make the connection between the boy in her arms and the womb in her belly. Whoever laid hands on Ivan could rule Markovy in the boy's name, undisputed so long as Aria was childless. Or better yet, dead. But if she married, or had a boy out of wedlock, the boyars would have to decide between the rights of a son by a second marriage, and any grandsons from a first marriage. And she had just seen how they settled things.

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Tears welled up. The only sure way to save herself was to be as bloodthirsty as they were. To do as her uncle suggested, kill the child in her arms, making herself the sole heir, thoroughly hated, but absolutely indispensable. Whoever she gave herself to would then be King.

Sister Karinana met them at the Silken Door, a young nun not much older than Aria, wearing the white gown of a novice, without a hood or veil. Blonde stubble was just growing back on her bare head. Aria herself had recalled Karinana from a far-off White Sea convent, convincing the patriarch to release the young nun from her vows. Setting Ivan down, she told the child-king, "Go to your mother."

Ivan clung to her, the way he always did when afraid. He had known Aria all his life — his mother he had met only last month. It was hard for him to know what to make of this short-haired sad-eyed woman who lavished affection on him. He felt more at ease with the Haram dwarves. Patiently, the woebegone young nun took her reluctant son into her arms, thanking Aria for bringing him. Aria knew that gratitude did not run deep. Sister Karinana could also see the threat that Aria presented to her son. Karinana had been a young noblewoman, groomed to wed the king, imagining she would be a queen. To meet the needs of Aria's family she had been put through the ordeal of a loveless marriage, separated from her son at birth, forced to take a nun's vows, then released from years in a cell to find her child fearful and indifferent.

Aria's father had done that, out of love for Aria's mother. And Aria still loved her dead father, loved him passionately. He had been the king, the center of her world, the source of all love and favor, the only parent she was allowed to keep. Which was why she had learned to laugh at the notion of justice, literally laugh out loud. Which spooked people, especially the boyars, seeing a little female demon-child laughing at the law. Growing up untamed.

Killer of Children

Harams often had to be built inside out and upside down with internal balconies and rooftop gardens, to best use limited sunlight while showing a blank face to the world. Aria's private bath was on the topmost floor, just below the hanging garden, light and airy, with thin columns supporting

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intricately carved alabaster screens that let in sunlight. Heavy wooden shutters closed off the heated room in winter — but in late October there were still days when bared screens caught the last of the light. Wrapped in a silk bathrobe, her toes trailing in warm rose water, Aria lay on cushions embroidered with spring flowers, listening to a castrated choirboy sing in sweet contralto to amuse her.

He succeeded admirably, having high Kazak cheekbones, dark dreamy eyes, and black hair as untamed as a horse's mane falling down his smooth strong back. His song thrilled Aria immensely, and his white robe trimmed in cloth-of-gold lay wide open at the throat. Seeing his sculpted neck shiver as he sang made her want to run hands over the boy's throbbing throat, feeling Jochi's singing with her fingers.

Girls came giggling in on bare feet, carrying bowls of honeyed yogurt — Tasha, Marta, Annya Tolstoy, and Sonya d'Medved — all wearing light robes in the steamy scented air. Clapping at the singing, they called to the boy, "Jochi, Jochi, play your balalaika for us. Play and we will feed you." Sonya d'Medved, a boyar's daughter and Haram favorite, tall and blonde, waved her bowl of sweet yogurt. "You can lick it from our fingers."

"Or off our breasts if you like," Tasha teased him, dripping yogurt down her open front, then wiping it up with her fingers, sticking them one by one in her mouth. Tasha was a Tartar savage and Aria's slave, but ranked high in the Haram's unofficial hierarchy by being intolerably beautiful and insufferably sure of herself.

Jochi ignored them, singing sweetly on. Careful in his habits, the choirboy ate sparingly, knowing eunuchs ran to fat — it would take more than a bevy of teenage girls to tempt him, no matter how they served the sweet yogurt. Seeing the boy would not give in, the girls set down their yogurt and swarmed over him, laughing and giggling, rubbing against the singing boy, kissing his cheek, then sliding slim hands inside the gold trim on his robe. His voice faltered, clearly distracted. Aria clapped for them to stop. "Sinful girls, why have you come to disturb this divine singing?"

"Your Highness." Sonya d'Medved made a teasing little curtsy. "We came to bathe."

"And sow trouble," Aria added, having been a teenager herself. Being locked away completely from men, cooped up among widows, wives, nuns, children, dwarves, and eunuchs could drive a young girl utterly

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crazy. Much of Aria's reputation for wildness came from repeated attempts at escape.

"Do not make us bathe below," Marta pleaded. "It is dreadful."

"You do not know how we suffer," Sonya complained, "with the noise, the steam, the closeness, the crowding...."

"With everyone talking at once," Annya added.

"And all whispering about us." Sonya imagined herself the subject of limitless conversation.

"And wanting to wash you," Tasha complained.

"Or scourge you with willow switches." Marta shivered.

"All because we wish to be clean!" Annya Tolstoy, the bloody-minded baron's statuesque niece, sounded like the most put-upon soul in Markovy — a martyr to cleanliness, licking honey yogurt off slim fingers.

Aria shook her head, knowing well what the Haram baths were like, having used them often when Karinana was queen. Cleaner and better than any public bath in Markovy, they were tiled with marble and trimmed in gold, but still wet, steamy, sulphurously hot, and usually crowded with noisy naked women of all ages, washing, talking, and doing their hair — the very heart of the Haram, where gossip circulated and girls' figures were judged. If you were cute and unwary, you could get groped in the sauna. Or be beaten with a willow switch. So why put up with that? These were the prettiest, and two of the noblest "virgins" in the Haram. "That makes it hardly worth bathing at all?"

"No, no, m'lady!" They shook their pretty heads in defense of cleanliness. "Not here! Not with you! This is paradise." Again that familiar m'lady — her handmaids were as bad as d'Hay. Beautiful blonde Sonya d'Medved made another bobbing curtsy. "Please let us stay and bathe here, under m'lady's watchful eye."

Tasha ran her hand through Jochi's hair, nodding at a three-stringed instrument lying behind him. "And have the boy play the balalaika."

Everyone looked to Aria. Bathing was a harmless indulgence, even thought to be healthful, and a eunuch's voice was a gift of the Almighty — and the surgeon's knife — but musical instruments were tools of the Evil One. And the cute young eunuch they were tormenting was a choirboy dedicated to Heaven. Sonya d'Medved smiled wickedly. "M'lady may do whatever she wants."

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Here in the Haram it was almost true. Aria nodded, giving royal consent. With triumphant squeals the girls slipped off their robes, smothered Jochi with parting kisses, then slid laughing into her bathing pool. Youth and beauty won again over decorum and duty. Splashing playfully, they started washing each other's hair, standing up to let warm rosewater slide like liquid silk off their smooth nude young bodies.

Lying back on embroidered cushions, Aria watched the boy's reaction under her lashes. Anyone who thought a eunuch could not have an erection had never been in a haram. Embarrassed, Jochi put the rounded body of his Kazak balalaika in his lap to hide his condition. Jochi had the "kindest" cut, used for clergy and lady's companions, when only the testicles were taken, unlike the "clean cut" eunuch favored in Kara Kathay. Jochi could copulate but not impregnate — a godsend to lonely Haram inmates.

She had deceived Bishop Peter in confession, saying she had lusted for a man in her heart; he naturally assumed she meant a "real" man — not a beautiful eunuch with broad shoulders, Kazak eyes, and the voice of an angel. Seeing Jochi's long strong fingers on the balalaika frets made her want to kiss the tips.

Aria had scant chance for a "normal" sex life. She had only met men when her father took her from the Haram, when Karinana was queen, and after her mother died. Her first lover had been her riding master, a small tough bandy-legged Kazak who spoke in grunts, but was wise in the ways of women and horses. And brave as well, since the penalties for molesting pretty young princesses were grotesque. Adept at everything he did, he employed the same sure gentleness with her that he used on young mares, seducing Aria effortlessly on horseback, riding along with her in his lap, bringing her to orgasm without even breaking gallop. Having climaxed the first time she kissed a man left Aria with unreal expectations about love. Her Kazak never forced her, nor demanded intercourse, taking only what she offered freely and happily, treating her like a wild young mare who needed gentling before she could be ridden, doling out love like lumps of sugar. "Treat her well when she is young, and a mare will love you all her life," he told her. "When she is grown, she's yours to ride, and her foals and stallion will follow."

She came to understand that Kazak men thought sex was something

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close comrades shared, like milk from the same mare — he would have done the same if she had been a boy. How could he teach her to ride and to trust him unless they were free with their bodies? And Aria was an avid learner, intoxicated by this wide open world of men and horses with its limitless horizons and dark exciting secrets. But Kazak means "Wanderer" and one day he was gone, leaving without notice and breaking her heart.

Since then she had fared less well, first with a handsome falconer, then with one of her huntsmen, and finally with the false-hearted guard captain who had betrayed her to Prince Akavarr — showing how far Aria had fallen. All of them treated her like a prize landing unexpectedly in their laps, to be unwrapped and put to immediate use. Leading to endless wrangling over what should be acts of love.

Which left women and eunuchs. Watching Sonya d'Medved holding up her long blonde hair while Marta washed it, Aria estimated the blonde girl's maidenhead was a vague memory at best, having gone to that same treacherous guard captain. Aria had been furious that a thoughtless slut like Sonya was free to do what a princess could not — at worst Sonya faced an abortion, or merciless beatings followed by forced marriage, but no one would kill her for giving birth.

"What does m'lady wish to hear?" Jochi asked, his balalaika tuned and ready, no longer looking embarrassed.

"Something romantic," she confessed, not minding the familiar m'lady from him. "To take my mind off troubles."

Smiling, Jochi sang a Kazak love song, light and stirring, like a horse's canter. Hearing it tugged at her heart, reminding her of riding free over open steppe — which she had not done since Father died — making her miss her strange wild girlhood among men, riding and hunting, and sleeping on the steppe, cooking the day's catch on a night fire while men told ribald tales around her, drinking themselves into a stupor; then slipping off in tipsy secrecy to kneel in the long grass, and loosen a fellow rider's trousers. Afterward she would lie in strong arms, learning Kazak names for the stars. Life with Father had given Aria a taste for male freedom that the Haram never provided.

Jochi stopped, seeing the sadness in her eyes, asking, "What troubles m'lady?"

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"Everything." Her troubles were so immense she could almost laugh at them. Her parents were both dead. Her first and only love had deserted her. Her latest fling had betrayed her to Prince Akavarr, and her boyars meant to murder her, or force her into marriage — whichever best suited their needs. She had no one to defend her, aside from d'Hay and his doubtful Gendarmes. And perhaps the Kazaks. Or maybe her dwarves and eunuchs.

"Even me?" Jochi asked, clearly wanting to be no trouble. Such obvious concern was touching. Of all the men she had known, only her father really cared for her — even her Kazak riding master abandoned her when he was done. But this ardent choirboy meant to be true to her, she could see it in his eyes.

Aria laughed. "You most of all." His angel's voice, beardless good looks, and man's body made an intoxicating combination — incredibly tempting when you were alone and unloved. And he could not get her pregnant.

"Why?" Jochi asked, taken aback, afraid he had offended.

"Because you give me hope." And love. Much as she needed love, now was hardly the time for it. Boyers would not just kill her, but anyone close to her as well. Noblemen could be incredibly vindictive; when Baron Tolstoy caught his wife with a groom, he had the groom castrated and hung outside his wife's window, alongside the stable boy who stood lookout. All winter Baroness Tolstoy — Prince Akavarr's sister — watched her lover twist in the icy wind beside the boy who helped bring them together. Aria did not want to find love, just in time to see him tortured to death by bullies in armor.

"But m'lady, I mean to give you hope," the young eunuch declared earnestly, "and to lighten your troubles."

She meant to give him his chance, for her troubles sorely needed lightening. And Jochi knew the risks of intimacy as well as she, better even, since he had seen how eunuchs were punished. Gentlemen guard captains could dally with "virgin" princesses, or young harlots-in-waiting like Sonya d'Medved, knowing the woman had more to lose than he did. For a Kazak riding master or a eunuch choirboy to do the same was a combination sacrilege and *lèse majesté*. Aria could hardly make love within the Haram without condemning her partner to a ghastly death —

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making her feel like a black widow. No wonder people thought her wicked.

Seeing the girls were done with their hair, she gave them leave to go. Sonya d'Medved smirked knowingly as the teenagers toweled and dressed, watching her guard captain lover being replaced by a choirboy. The boyar's daughter had a little yellow bird tattooed on her bare hip, the d'Medved golden martlet. Tasha came over to whisper to Jochi in Tartar, before going giggling off with the others. Girls' voices faded, replaced by warm rosewater splashing into mosaic basins, leaving Aria alone with her young eunuch.

"Does m'lady wish another song?" Jochi asked blandly, his balalaika still resting lightly in his lap. Even a eunuch could have a sense of humor — especially about making love.

She shook her head. "Not now." Shy and unsure, she reached out to draw him closer. And he came to her, tender and eager at the same time, setting down the balalaika, and taking her in his big firm hands. His smooth strong body smelled of musk; his kiss felt incredibly sweet.

When their lips parted, she clung to him in happy relief. How long was it since she had been held like this? So long she could not remember. Here was what passed for Haram freedom, freedom in hiding, her private world where she could have things as she pleased, where she and her women could be warm in winter, free to sip strong coca and speak their minds, free to hear music played, and to have hot saunas and cool sherbet, or make illicit love behind locked doors. A nagging voice told her to make the best of it, for it might not last. Reveling in forbidden bliss, she whispered, "Do you love me?"

Jochi grinned. "M'lady, of course...."

She stopped his lips with her finger, "Please, do not call me, m'lady."

"Your Highness, I am sorry if...."

"Aria," she told him. "You need not be sorry, just call me Aria." That was what the men who loved her called her. Her Kazak never called her anything but "Aria." Or when she had been especially good, "Pretty Filly."

"Aria, we all...."

"Say it again," she insisted, thrilling to the sound — to be surrounded by people and hardly ever hear your name could be incredibly lonely.

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"Aria. Oh Aria." Jochi laughed, holding her closer, kissing her harder. His hand pushed up her robe to bare her hip, sending cool shivers down her back. "We all love you. My heart is yours to command."

She sighed, relaxing into his grip. "I do not want to command love. Sometimes I barely want to command at all — but no one gives me that luxury. Please, let love at least come free."

"Aria, I love you freely." Jochi turned suddenly serious, looking levelly at his mistress. "Everyone does."

"Everyone?" She thought of her boyars, and plain upright Markovites who hated her foreign blood, and superstitious serfs who heard hedge priests' lurid sermons about her Haram orgies — but all these opinions might not count to a Kazak eunuch who played the balalaika and prayed to heathen gods.

"Everyone who matters," Jochi declared earnestly. "Prince Ivan, all the eunuchs, those pretty girls who just left, the best of the dwarves, Bishop Peter, and what older women still have their wits. Some of them live in your grandfather's time."

And a fine time it had been — if you could not use your imagination, what was the use of being locked away? "I wish it were my father's time. Father cared for me, and protected me."

"Aria, I would protect you." Jochi looked beautifully concerned, like ardent young d'Hay — both eager to save her, yet clearly lacking the means. "Her" boyars had the men and arms to march into the Haram and take her, as soon as they summoned up the nerve. All Jochi and d'Hay could do for her was die. Tenderly he took her hands in his, kissing them lightly. "First m'lady must trust and believe in me."

"Trust you?" An outrageous concept — after trusting only herself for so long, her psyche hardly worked that way. "How?"

He pushed her hands up above her head, holding them tight in his, resting easily on his elbows. She however could hardly move, and when she tried to protest, Jochi kissed her hard on the mouth to stop her. When he released her lips, he whispered, "By giving in to Death."

Aira lay staring up at him, pinned to the cushions by his body, hands held above her head. Excited, mystified, and somewhat scared — she had meant to have this boy, and now he was most certainly having her. By the way he pressed hard against her thigh, she could tell this young barbarian

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eunuch thoroughly enjoyed manhandling a princess. She asked as calmly as she could, "What do you mean?"

"Your only chance is to give yourself over to Death, utterly and completely. Fear alone holds us back. Accept your death, and the boyars will have no power over you."

Except to kill. Knowing she could not break his grip, she took a deep breath and asked politely, "Jochi, please will you let me go?"

"No. I do love you m'lady, but...."

"Aria," she reminded the big boy holding her down.

"Aria." He smiled devilishly. "I love you Aria. But I cannot let your go until you have heard what I have to say."

She relaxed, giving in and looking up at him. "Talk."

"You do not know who to trust." He said it seriously and succinctly, as if this were somehow news to her; the last man she let hold her betrayed her to Prince Akavarr. "So first you must know you can trust me with your life. After all, I could be an assassin paid by boyars to kill you; any slave or eunuch could."

She nodded solemnly — that was how her mother died. Shifting his weight, he used one hand to pin both her wrists, then picked up a feather pillow, a green one embroidered with dandelions, practically her favorite. Holding it next to her upturned face — so close she could see the stitching on the tiny golden petals — Jochi sounded dead serious, reminding her the boy was born a horse barbarian, and had been badly treated since. "I could smother you with this pillow, and no one would hear, no one would save you. Tasha is watching the hall beyond, seeing we are left alone."

Again she nodded, remembering her mother's murder and her childhood terror of armed men. Letting go, she lay limp, listening to water splash on stone, feeling the weight of Jochi's body and the strength in his arms. Tears welled up. When her mother was murdered, her father had taken her in his arms and held her tight, promising to love and protect her always. Now her father too was dead, but she was again in the arms of someone who would not hurt her, nor betray her, nor even get her with child — who would risk horrible death to see her alive and happy. She started to sob with relief.

Releasing her wrists, the boy tucked the pillow under her, holding her close while she cried, stroking her long black hair. Jochi whispered,

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"Sweet m'lady Aria, you need never fear death and you need never be alone — those two great weights may be lifted from your soul, but only by appealing to Death herself."

Wiping her eyes, she stared up at him, happy but bewildered. How strange to be in this heathen boy's arms, listening patiently to his wild opinions — no longer a Princess, nor even a lady, just Aria — not required to know all the answers, nor make all the decisions. "To Death?"

"Yes." Jochi nodded solemnly. "In person, to the demi-goddess herself — that alone will set you free."

She stared into his beautiful barbarian face, strangely excited that she and this bizarre boy held not just each other's bodies, but each other's lives in their hands. Was he mad? Probably, though that no longer scared her — the madder the better if it made her this happy. Kazaks were horse barbarians, worshipping raw forces of nature, fire, water, the four winds. Love and Death were demi-gods, natural forces in human form. To them, Death was a beautiful woman who lived far away at the back of the North Wind by the shores of the icy White Sea — or so her Kazak had said. Jochi must take it all more seriously. "In person?" Aria asked. "How is that possible?"

"It can be done." Jochi reached under her robe, starting to play with his pretty princess. "Though not by me," he added. "It is a woman's secret." From the way he touched her, he clearly knew far more about women's private mysteries than a "sexless" choirboy should. "Promise me that when the woman comes for you, m'lady will go with her." Having delivered his message, Jochi was anxious to get her agreement, eager for what came next.

"Aria," she reminded him — no man was going to have her who did not know her proper name. "And, yes, I will go with her," she promised. Only then did she give in to his stiff excitement.

Two days later, after midnight on All Souls' Eve, the woman came for her. Aria lay naked and asleep in her silk-curtained bed, with Marta and a dwarf on watch in the room beyond. Soft hands shook her awake. Expecting the summons would be from Tasha, or one of the Kazaks, she was astonished to see Sonya d'Medved sitting on her bed, wearing a plain black shift belted at the waist beneath a fur-lined cloak. Her long blonde hair shone in the lamplight, and Sonya had a knife thrust nonchalantly

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through her belt, though bringing edged weapons into Aria's privy chambers was forbidden — in fact a flogging offense. But the boyar girl was a hopeless savage whose mother had died in childbirth and whose father was eaten by a were-leopard from out of the Iron Wood. "Forgive me, m'lady," Sonya whispered. "It is time."

Again the familiar m'lady. Aria almost asked, "Time for what?" — but stopped herself, not wanting the arrogant boyar's daughter ever to see her at a loss. It was bad enough having Sonya see her naked. Slipping into a long fur-trimmed chemise, she got out of bed, silently wrapping herself in a cloak.

Sonya picked up the lamp and went to the back wall of the room, pushing sideways on a piece of paneling that opened like a puzzle box, revealing hidden stairs. The Haram was honeycombed with secret passages, and Aria had known of this one since she was three, but she was sorry to see Sonya knew about it too, since the panel made a perfect bedroom listening post. Whispering, "Please follow me, m'lady," Sonya led her down the winding stairs, closing the panel behind them.

At the base of the stairs was a passageway leading into the Haram vaults; here Sonya turned and went down on her knees, head bowed, asking, "Does m'lady hate me?"

"No," Aria replied curtly, standing on the last step, trying to keep her antipathy toward Sonya completely out of this.

Setting down the lamp, Sonya drew the knife from her belt, handing it hilt first to Aria, "Here, m'lady, if I have offended you in the least, take my life now."

"Nonsense!" Aria tried to hand knife back, exasperated by the impertinent girl's theatrics.

Sonya would not take it. Clasping her hands tightly behind her back, the boyar's daughter looked straight up at Aria, baring her swan-white neck. "Your Highness, we are both orphans beset by enemies, and there must be total trust between us. After tonight, my life is in m'lady's hands. If m'lady means to kill me for giving in to her guard captain, then I beg her to do it now. I would rather die here by your hand than have men drag me to the stake and burn me for witchcraft."

Feeling silly holding the knife, she told the blonde girl at her feet, "Get up. I will not kill you."

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Sonya refused. "If m'lady will not forgive me, I would rather she did kill me."

Damning the girl's insufferable pride, Aria declared, "I care not who you sleep with."

"M'lady does care." Tears appeared in Sonya's eyes. "Or she would not be so cold to me."

Aria stared down at the girl, as if she were seeing Sonya d'Medved for the first time. "You are a most remarkable child."

"So I hope." Sonya smiled, wiping off tears on her shoulder, while still holding her hands behind her. "When I was a motherless little girl, I gave myself to Death, knowing I would never live my life as I willed unless I was willing to die for it. Nothing I have seen since has made me think differently. If I try to please others, the best I could hope for is to live under the whip of a husband picked by my brothers — so I learned to please myself." That explained the guard captain. Markovite marriage customs called for the bride to kneel and kiss her husband's horse whip, to show he could use it on her as needed. Aria always knew Sonya d'Medved had airs above her station; now it seemed the teenage noblewoman aspired to be free. "Is that so bad?" the girl asked. "Will m'lady not forgive me?"

Lowering the knife, she reached out her left hand, the witch's hand, saying, "Aria."

Sonya looked dumbly up at her, the first time Aria had seen the blonde girl speechless. "M'lady is improper," she explained. "You must call me Aria."

Taking her outstretched hand, the young d'Medved pressed it to her tearstained cheek, murmuring, "Does m'lady Aria forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive." Aria was glad to be rid of that treasonous captain — in fact Sonya could have every Gendarme in the Guard so far as she cared. "I just did not know you loved me." That was the true surprise, amazing considering how much she had despised the girl.

"We all love you." Sonya stared up at Aria, looking like her mistress must be crazy. "You are the hope of the Haram. Of those who still have hope — for without you we are surely lost."

With that Sonya rose up, kissed her surprised mistress, then took back the knife and picked up the lamp, leading her down the passageway into the Haram vaults, an ancient warren of secret passages, hidden rooms, and

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dwarf tunnels. Cranky old Queen Ivanovna II was supposed to be bricked up somewhere down here. Sonya wound her way deep into the heart of the labyrinth, where huge Romanesque vaults supported the floors above. Ahead Aria saw light flickering between the columns.

It was Tasha, wrapped in a cloak and holding a slotted lantern, waiting by a thick wooden door. Aria shivered, thinking of what lay behind the door. Sonya took her hand, whispering, "Highness, I know what you feel. Tasha is a barbarian — nothing bothers her — but we were bred for better. Promise me you will give in completely, no matter how horrible it seems, otherwise we have no hope at all." Feeling the fierce sense of self-importance in the teenager's grip, Aria nodded silently. Far beyond worrying about Sonya's presumption, she meant to be guided by the blonde girl's unbending determination to live free or die.

Tasha raised her lantern and pushed back the heavy door, sending rats scurrying. Aria had not been here since she was a child, with a child's curious awe of death and dying, but the place had hardly changed a whit — bones were stacked high by the door, long bones on one side, skulls on the other, casting macabre shadows in the dancing light. Royalty lay along one wall, mummified in stone niches, but otherwise the bones were mixed together, women and eunuchs, slaves and favorites, some in neat stacks, others in heaps and piles — only the small children's skulls stood out.

From deep within the charnel house another light winked back at theirs — tiny and red in the shadows. It was the Bone Witch's fire, waiting for her in the heart of the Haram's ossuary.

Aria had heard there was a new Bone Witch, a young one, but she had never thought to see her — at least not on this side of the grave. Yet there was the witch sitting in her white winding sheet, wearing her knuckle-bone necklace and her charm bag stitched from human skin, holding a shining skull in her lap — a figure out of fairy tales come horribly to life. This witch did look young, with smooth ash-white skin, high Lapp cheekbones, and full wide lips, but her long tangled hair was already ivory white, held in place by carved bone clips. Her little fire burned at the end of a low heap of earth shaped like a dwarf's burial mound. Looking up, the witch fixed Aria with big alert eyes, saying, "Welcome, Your Highness. Make yourself at home."

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Forever. Here was where Aria hoped to end up — her mother and father lay together in a nearby niche. Curtsying low, she thanked the Bone Witch — much as Aria might claim to be Princess Regent of Markovy, it was plain who ruled down here. Aria's august uncle Grand Duke Sergey, her father's deviously ambitious younger brother, was killed by the Bone Witch — along with his Ensign, Master-at-arms, and several lances of Gendarmes — after they foolishly barged into the Iron Wood, bothering her in her lair. Aria did not doubt for an instant the sorceress could do the same to her.

Acknowledging her curtsy, the Bone Witch smiled archly, asking, "Why have you come here ahead of your time?"

So this was where she would lie. Aria surveyed the charnel vault with adult eyes, strangely relieved. Here her body would spend eternity; but would it be in a noble niche, or heaped in a corner with the bones of slaves and stillborn babies? More to the point, did it matter? Not much from the look of it. She replied softly, "I came to make submission to Death."

Nodding like she knew the answer ahead of time, the Bone Witch asked, "Why now?"

"Because this is All Souls' Eve," Aria answered, knowing this was the night when the gates between the worlds opened. "My life hangs in the balance, and somehow I must cast out fear."

"You have found the right place." Smiling wider, the white-haired young witch reached out a slim hand. "Come meet your death. There is no sacrifice like a royal sacrifice."

Children knew the Bone Witch could kill with a touch, but Aria unhesitatingly took the witch's hand, determined to give in totally, finding the white fingers firm and cool.

Rising up, the Bone Witch placed the skull from her lap at the end of the altar mound, empty eye sockets facing the fire. Guiding Aria around to stand beside the earthen altar, the Bone Witch let go her hand, telling her to disrobe. "Naked you come, and naked you must go."

Again Aria obeyed at once. Sonya and Tasha helped her disrobe, leaving her nude and shivering in the chilly bone vault, surrounded by generations of Haram dead. Then they laid her down on her back, stretched out along the earthen altar, her head resting on the bare skull by the fire. Sonya and Tasha knelt at her feet, holding down her legs. Kneeling

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next to her head, with the fire between them, the Bone Witch took Aria's wrists in her hands, beginning a low keening chant.

Sonya and Tasha took up the chant, hands clasped tight around Aria's ankles. Firmly fixed to the earth, Aria stared at the dark vault above, feeling the heat of the fire through her scalp. Lulled by the chanting, her mind started to drift. Leaning forward, the Bone Witch blew fumes from the fire into Aria's face. Breathing deep, Aria drew in the fumes, closing her eyes and shutting out the charnel house, letting her mind drift farther, feeling herself sink deeper into the cold and dark.

Slowly the chant faded into blackness, and Aria felt like she was flying, free of the ossuary, free of the Haram, borne away by the North Wind. Northern peoples had a cold hell, since fire held no particular horror for them — they had already seen hell, knowing full well it was winter without end. Death lived in a castle at the edge of the Arctic Sea, where winters were freezing black. In her mind's eye, Aria saw the castle locked in winter, with the air so icy it took your breath away; snow lay on towers and walls, and on the twin headlands. Ice spread out from the narrows, covering the Sound and stretching along the shores of the White Sea, breaking into drift ice in the dark distance.

Whatever spell the Bone Witch put on her carried her straight into the snow-capped castle, passing through shuttered windows caulked with moss and hung with thick tapestries, landing her in the warm heart of the keep, where Lady Death sat enthroned before her fire. Standing stark naked — though not the least chilled — Aria stared at Death, who sat on her scorpion throne, robed in black and wearing a great horned headdress that showed only the smiling face of a young woman. Despite her fearsome reputation Lady Death was small, and her throne room was full of life — animals had been brought in for the winter, not just dogs and pigs, but two huge rocs as well, three times as tall as a man and seated on high perches, preening their feathers, and cocking their great beaked heads to eye the castle pigs.

Lady Death bade her welcome, "How happy to see you, my dear — if only in spirit. My name is Kore, but you know me as Death." Lady Kore indicated a strikingly handsome young man with beautiful blond curls standing nearby, wearing a white-gold page's costume with angel-wing sleeves. "This is Cousin Eros, for Love and Death are bound by blood."

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Eros bowed politely. Kore nodded to a blonde teenager on her left, dressed in green like a maiden huntress, who might have been Eros's twin — only the huntress was younger and female — showing how closely the heathen gods interbred. "This is my sister Persephone, Killer of Children and Maidens." Persephone smiled, showing her dimples.

"And you are Aria, Princess Regent of Markovy," added Lady Kore. "Why have you come here ahead of your time?" Lady Kore sounded at a loss, but was only being polite. Death was ready whenever you were, and often long before. "As you see, we had no plans to receive you."

Feeling silly, standing naked before her betters — if only in spirit — Aria answered as plainly as she could, "I came to make my submission to Death, to cast out my fear."

"Then be welcome." Kore smiled warmly. "But only for a while, since your time is yet to come." Lady Death indicated her little sister, saying, "Persephone will lead you to the dance."

Aria was ashamed to find herself impertinently mumbling, "Thank you, m'lady."

Unruffled by Aria's familiarity, Lady Kore returned the compliment, "Thank you, My Princess — for not fearing me."

Her blonde huntress sister, Persephone the Killer of Children and Maidens, strolled over, smiling slyly at Aria's nude form, "Divine costume, my girl. They will adore it at the Dance."

Crooking her finger, Persphone led Aria from the throne room, guiding her down a wide winding stairway toward the hall below. Music wafted up, light and compelling, making Aria's bare limbs twitch, aching to dance. Her feet started taking the stone steps two at a time, with a little skip and flourish. Persephone smiled at the barefoot two-step, saying, "Remember, I am the Killer of Maidens. Call on me and I will come."

Aria nodded, putting herself entirely into Persephone's hands, letting the Killer of Children lead her into the dance. Ahead in Death's firelit hall dancers whirled about, casting long leaping shadows on the keep's stone walls. Drawing closer, she saw a shadowy whirlpool of people in winding sheets, flapping robes and tattered clothes, spiraling in and out, twining back upon themselves, women, children, priests and paupers, saintly nuns, mothers with babies, Tartars and Kazaks, a thief with the noose still

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hanging around his neck. Castle cats joined in the *Danse Macabre,* twirling to the tune of a lute and fiddles.

Giving in to the music, Aria took her place in the Dance of Death between a little girl in her nightshirt and a plodding serf in straw boots. Twirling in and out, she saw faces of the dead spiral by, grinning ecstatically; most were strangers, but some she recognized, famous saints and sinners, then her old nurse. Prince Akavarr spun past, grinning broadly, then came her parents, arms linked and looking happy, crowns set jauntily on their heads. Aria opened her mouth to call to them, and the spell was broken.

Suddenly she felt chilled to the bone, finding herself back in the charnel house lying naked on the earth beside the Bone Witch's tiny fire, staring up into frigid darkness. Shaking so hard her teeth rattled, Aria drew in her limbs, unable to feel fingers or toes. Sonya and Tasha threw cloaks on her spasming body, adding her chemise and their own shifts to the pile. Then they crawled in naked with her, wrapping their arms and legs around Aria, hugging her icy body to their breasts, sharing their body heat, using living warmth to bring her back from the dead. This was the age-old Markovite cure for hypothermia, enfolding the victim in living flesh — preferably young and female, though men did it for each other when there were no women about.

By the time she could sit upright, the Bone Witch was gone and her fire dying — leaving Aria alone with her handmaids in the cold heart of the Haram vaults, unable to stand, much less walk. Sonya had to hold up her shivering body while Tasha dressed her; then they set out, with Aria hanging onto the blonde boyar's daughter for support. Tasha went ahead with the lantern, and was soon out of sight. Stumbling along behind, Sonya kept whispering encouragement to her mistress. "Come, m'lady, there is a warm bed waiting — we only have to get there."

Jochi met them at the foot of the secret stairs, saying, "Tasha told me to come. She has gone to get Marta and Anna Tolstoy." Taking her from Sonya, Jochi carried her up the dark steps to her bed, where he went to work on her legs, kneading and rubbing life back into them. Tasha returned with warm sheets and a sleepy Anna Tolstoy. Together they took over from Jochi, who got under the warm sheets with her.

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Slowly life returned to her chilled limbs, sending pains shooting into frozen toes and fingers. Her teeth stopped chattering, and Jochi's big body warmed her spine, returning heat to her frozen core. Expectant young faces surrounded her, concerned for their Princess, but eagerly wanting to hear what she had seen. Sonya d'Medved was unable to take the suspense. "Did m'lady see Death?"

She nodded weakly, and Anna Tolstoy spoke for her. "Obviously, you blonde oaf, can you not see her Highness is half dead still?" Tolstoys shared the blood royal, but the d'Medveds were mere boyars, pushy upcountry barons feuding with the Kazaks at the edge of the Iron Wood.

Sonya started to snap back, but Aria stopped her with her hand, her tingling fingers barely feeling the girl's warm lips. She told them, "I did see Death, and I made my submission."

"Did she offer her protection?" This time no one reprimanded Sonya, knowing their fates all hung on the answer.

She shook her head slowly, seeing their faces fall. "But Death bade her younger sister Persephone escort me to the dance."

That perked up the girls, who asked what Persephone was like, none of them having ever met a demi-goddess, certainly not one as fearsome as the Killer of Children. She described the divine huntress, with her green tunic and golden curls — not mentioning how she ended up dancing with Prince Akavarr and her dead parents. "And I saw Love as well," she added. "He is both young and beautiful — looking like Persephone's male twin."

"More beautiful than me?" Jochi sounded wounded, having nursed his princess back to life only to hear her babble about hobnobbing with handsome demi-deities.

"Of course." Anna Tolstoy rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Love is a god — you are just a eunuch."

Haughty teenagers were the Haram curse, and Aria did not reprimand Anna, merely waving her to silence, asking to be alone. "Except for Jochi, for I want to hear music."

Her handmaids rejected that, insisting she must have a woman with her. "Jochi is a man — mostly. He will be lost in his music. Your Highness needs a handmaid to see to her needs, so your majesty may be warm, fed, and rested, not just entertained."

She chose Sonya, to teach Anna Tolstoy not to be so proud, and

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because the blonde girl looked devastated at the thought of being dismissed with the others. Already Aria sensed a dangerous attachment — but these were dangerous times. Tasha promised to keep watch, and Aria told her to get a trustworthy dwarf to help her. Tasha and Jochi grinned to hear their mistress telling a Tartar to be wary. Horse nomads were masters of stealth, moving invisibly over open steppe, appearing without warning a thousand leagues from where they were last seen.

Producing his balalaika, Jochi played her Kazak tunes that sounded like wind singing through the grass tops, or tinkling caravan bells. Lying beneath a big down comforter, Aria dozed off, waking now and again to the music. Sonya was in and out of bed, keeping her warm and making her strong black tea. Truth to tell, Sonya just wanted to be at the center of things. Aria guessed the girl gave herself to the guard captain mainly to get closer to her mistress. And it worked — Sonya was happily sharing her bed, and flirting with Jochi over her shoulder. Anna Tolstoy was right; Sonya was a scheming, willful, selfish upstart, determined to live free and well by whatever means she could. All of which qualities Aria desperately needed.

Sleeping through All Soul's Day, she got up only to hear mass from Bishop Peter, giving her thanks and praying for the souls of the dead. Back in bed, she did not stir until Sonya brought in a light supper of yogurt, dried fruit, fresh loaves, and plump steppe larks in prune sauce. Her brush with Death left her in no mood for stewed songbirds; picking at her fruit and yogurt instead, she offered the rest to Jochi, who announced himself famished, setting down his balalaika and tearing off some bread, dipping it in prune sauce. Sonya asked if he missed his savage homeland, and Jochi nodded. "There is nothing like seeing the great Sea of Grass bowing in the wind, showing seven shades of green and running from one end of the world to the other."

"How did you come here?" asked Sonya, picking a lark apart with painted nails and pretty white teeth.

"Tartars," the boy told her, saying it the way people say "plague" — like a natural calamity. "Their flying ships fell on our camp without warning, taking us in our sleep. Everyone taller than a wagon wheel was killed, and after watching our parents die, we were marched west toward Barbary in a great caravan of children. We bigger boys had wooden yokes around our necks, and the little ones were roped together."

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"So do you hate Tasha for being a Tartar?" Sonya asked.

Jochi looked at her like the question made no sense. "Do you hate your cat for killing songbirds?"

"Sometimes." Sonya sucked meat off a lark's long bones.

Shrugging at civilized ways, Jochi went back to his story. "We crossed the Black Sands desert, and were sold to Barbary traders by the shores of the Hyrcanian Sea — where we boys were castrated. Since the Barbary traders would not take us uncut and Tartars have a taboo against it, they found a Christian to do it."

Neither Aria nor Sonya wanted to hear the horrible details, or how the wound was cauterized by burying him in hot sand. "Yet it does not stop you from making love," Sonya observed.

"I thought it would." Jochi looked downcast, worse than when he told of his parents' murder. "I thought I would never touch a woman or have a woman touch me. Ever."

"But you found out you did not need them?" Sonya suggested, who saw small need for testes herself, knowing full well where they could be found.

Jochi laughed. "I found out I did not need women. Cute young choirboys need never be lonely." Being Kazak, he found it natural to make love with his music master — swearing it made him more attentive and loosened up his voice.

"But that is a mortal sin," Sonya pointed out — technically both were priests, with their manhoods dedicated to Heaven.

"Only if unconfessed," Jochi reminded her.

"So you confessed?" Aria asked, wondering what penance was proscribed for getting love lessons from your music teacher.

"Yes indeed," Jochi declared, "and I was soon sharing a cot with my Father Confessor." Castration was supposed to prevent this — but in fact further confessions just led Jochi to lovers farther up the ecclesiastic hierarchy.

"How high?" Sonya demanded, pleased to hear that her betters were hopelessly steeped in sin.

"As high as you can," replied Jochi coyly.

"Old Bishop Peter?" Aria was aghast. Sharing a bedmate with Sonya had been bad enough — she never expected to be doing it with the Patriarch of Markov.

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"Old but upright," Jochi assured them, "and he has been most kind to me — giving me little gifts and seeing to my advancement. How else could a poor Kazak get to sing to a princess?" How else indeed? Aria had thought it just a stroke of luck when Jochi became her choirboy.

Hearing a shriek from down the hall, Aria looked up to see a female dwarf come running in wearing a feathered gown. It was Pipit, one of her seamstresses, a smart nimble-fingered girl from a peasant family. Doing a swift bobbing curtsy, Pipit announced, "Men, m'lady. Boyars. My Lord Tolstoy too."

Aghast, Aria sat bolt up in bed, pulling her robe tight around her, realizing that boyars had at last dared pass the Silken Door. Men were in the Haram! Not just any men, the men who most wanted to do her ill. Heaven help them all. Hearing bootsteps in the hall and the rattle of armor, she had no time to summon the Guard — if she still had one — her only escape was into the Haram vaults. Sonya saw it too, leaping naked out of bed to open the secret panel at the back of the bedroom.

Too late. Anna Tolstoy dashed in, nearly tripping over the dwarf, her face white as the Bone Witch's hair. "My uncle," the girl gasped. "He...."

Before she could say it, Baron Tolstoy himself appeared in full armor at the head of his retainers, an iron mace in his hand, the type called a "holy water sprinkler" — much favored by fighting bishops because it killed without shedding blood. His men were less fastidious, having drawn swords, and with huge grins on their faces; at last they were getting what men had wanted for centuries, to see the perfumed interior of the King's Haram — without giving up prized body parts for the privilege. Her former guard captain was with them, still wearing his silver Gendarme's armor, clutching Tasha's bare arm in his mailed fist, half-dragging the helpless Tartar into the room.

Aria ordered them out at once, standing upright on her bed, pointing at the door and wishing she had on her crown. "Go immediately," she demanded, not thinking they would obey, just trying to give Sonya time to escape down the secret stairs, hoping the girl would think to take Jochi with her. Not everyone had to die with her. "This is the Haram," she reminded them, "forbidden to men — your being here is ungodly and indecent."

That got a nasty laugh from her armored boyars, big bearded men,

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obscenely happy to be seeing a princess in her boudoir, with a naked handmaid and a eunuch with a balalaika. Anna Tolstoy stood frozen in horror. Tasha and Jochi stared at each other in expressionless silence — being heathen nomads they knew they had fewer rights than dogs. Pipit the dwarf had already disappeared.

Baron Tolstoy told the faithless guard captain, "Take her, but gently." Handing the unresisting Tasha off to a retainer, the handsome black-bearded captain stepped up onto Aria's bed — for the first time — their abortive trysts having all taken place outside the Haram, on hunts, in the stables, or while boating. Right now she regretted ever having promoted this arrogant, stalwart-looking guardsman to captain — much less ever letting him touch her. He reached his mailed hand up to her.

Suddenly, Sonya d'Medved was standing between them, still stark naked, golden hair spilling down her back. "Stop," Sonya shouted. "This is your Princess Regent, in his majesty's Haram." Aria's heart sank. Idiot girl, she was supposed to get away. Sonya at least could have lived. Aria had counted on Sonya to think only of herself; instead the boyar's daughter was smack in the midst of things, putting her bare body between Aria and these killers. Bravely facing the big armored guardsman, with his hard dark eyes and haughty sneer, Sonya tried to shame the man they once shared, saying, "You cannot touch her royal person."

Their former lover laughed, claiming, "It is far, far too late for that." Then he backhanded Sonya across the mouth with his armored hand, knocking her down and drawing blood. Boyars cheered the blonde girl's fall, and began beating on Jochi with their sword hilts — though Tolstoy warned them sharply not to kill him. Stepping over the sobbing Sonya, her guard captain again held out his mailed hand, his steel knuckles flecked with the teenager's blood, saying, "Her Highness had best come with me."

"Tell them to stop beating the boy," she commanded, glaring back at him. "Then I will come."

He laughed again, "You have no choice."

She turned to Tolstoy, "Hurt him any more, and I will make you kill me right here." Death had taught her she always had a choice. "Then you will have done all this just for a corpse."

Tolstoy raised his hand, halting the beating, and she let her traitorous

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guard captain drag her off the bed. Boyars closed in on her; the blades she had seen since childhood finally bared. Ever since she was a little girl these men had hated her for her foreign blood and her mother's ways, for mocking their power, and for filling the palace with music and song; now they were finally free to do as they pleased with the godless witch. She could feel their jubilant relief.

Death Takes a Flier

Aria found herself back in her old nursery, not the room where she was born, but a windowless room that Karinana had put her in when she was twelve, with a high ornate blue-white ceiling and small decorative panels set at a child's eye level. She had not liked it then, and liked it even less now. The gaily painted wooden door locked on the outside, making it seem like a cell — more now than ever. To a teenager it felt like a prison, to an adult it was one. Worst of all there were no secret entrances she knew of, and furnishings were equally meager, a pair of sleeping cushions, a fur coverlet, and a chamber pot, showing her stay was temporary.

Sitting on one of the cushions, the coverlet wrapped around her, she worried about Jochi and the others. Aria had already given herself up to death. All her life these men had longed to destroy her, now they had only to decide how. Knowing she was lost freed her of fear — still she hoped somehow to save those few who loved her. She had Tolstoy's word he would not hurt Jochi, and so long as no one knew they were lovers the baron had no need to break his word about a choirboy. Her handmaids had no such guarantee. Sonya had already been hurt, and Tasha was Tartar and female, giving her no rights whatsoever, just the sort of good-looking girl any boyar could throw a rope around and take back to his household. Aria hoped Tasha's new owner was kind. She was not terribly worried about Anna Tolstoy.

Anna's uncle appeared unannounced, unlocking her door and swaggering in with a cheery, "Good morrow, Your Highness. Have you slept well?"

"Oh, how wonderful." She lifted an eyebrow, letting herself smile a bit. "Someone to change the chamber pot. You will find it in the corner by the door."

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Baron Tolstoy laughed. "As always, Your Highness has an excellent sense of humor."

Obviously. It came with being a princess, otherwise she would have gone utterly daft by now. "I merely hoped to get something out of your visit."

"Her Highness can indeed profit from my visit." Tolstoy beamed happily. "If you are cooperative."

"Cooperative?" Aria eyed him evenly. "How?"

His voice dropped, becoming conspiratorially familiar. "Begin by telling me where you hid Prince Ivan."

Ivan gone? This was news to her, but it explained a lot. No wonder she was being treated so royally — giving a private audience to Baron Tolstoy, instead of two brawny eunuchs with a bow string. Without Ivan, she alone had her father's blood and could produce an unquestioned heir. She dared not let Tolstoy know she had no idea what had happened to her half-brother, saying instead, "Why should I tell you?"

"We are cousins," Baron Tolstoy reminded her, "sharing the blood royal — among other things."

"Distant cousins." Her blood was far more royal than his, but they were kin of a sort, both descended from Ivan the Idiot. Her paternal great-great-grandmother was half-sister to Tolstoy's great-grandmother — and from what she heard they had hated each other as only half-sisters can.

"Precisely," Tolstoy declared warmly, "and cousins so distant could easily become closer."

This amazing clod was flirting with her. So what if they were kissing cousins? She still never imagined Baron Tolstoy as marriage material; for one he was still married to the late Prince Akavarr's sister, Aria's aunt. She told him pointedly, "Prince Ivan's safety means the most to me — he is true heir to the throne."

"Of course," Tolstoy intoned piously. "And who better to watch over him than his loving cousins — we could be Ivan's foster parents."

"Yes indeed." She smiled primly. "Too bad one of us is already married." Though not happily; having his wife's lover hanging outside the window all winter hinted at a troubled marriage.

Tolstoy answered airily, "Wives can be put aside, as you well know."

Just what you want to hear from a prospective bridegroom. Marriage

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was clearly a matter of convenience to Tolstoy, and at the moment he found it convenient to propose to her. She would be mad to accept, and a total dolt to turn him down directly. Aria flashed her sweetest smile. "When you are free, come see me."

"Or we can wring Prince Ivan's location out of you with the rack and thumbscrews," Baron Tolstoy suggested, "like many are loudly proposing. That might amuse both of us."

Marrying Tolstoy or death by hideous torture — hard call. How come she never got the easy picks? Why did she have to submit to witches, confront Death, and face down armed maniacs in her boudoir? Someone else could do it far better. Young d'Hay had the brawn and bravery for armed mayhem, and Tolstoy seemed to think he could do a vastly better job of governing Markovy's absurd collection of murderous boyars, eunuch priests, impudent handmaids, heathen witches, defenseless serfs and barbarous Kazaks. Looking coolly back at the baron, Aria told him, "Torture will not make me give up my little brother."

"Really, Your Highness?" Tolstoy glared down his long nose at her. "Your loving boyars are still eager to try."

She shrugged, not knowing where Ivan was anyway. Having given herself up to Death made Aria far less fearful of torture. Death offered a haven to all who had nowhere else to go, and Persephone, Killer of Children and Maidens, had promised to come if she called. Seeing he was getting nowhere, Tolstoy departed, presumably to search for Prince Ivan.

Leaving her alone to think. Ivan gone? What could that mean? Ivan might just be dead, but she doubted it. Had Tolstoy secretly done away with Ivan, he would be pressing his suit much harder. Tolstoy acted like he still hoped to get hold of Ivan, and might not need Aria at all. But if Ivan was alive, where was he? Could Karinana have him? Not likely, even Tolstoy would have checked to see if the boy was with his mother. Besides, if Ivan were free, he would not go to Karinana — but to someone he knew better. But who? She almost did not want to guess — what she did not know they could not wring out of her.

And as long as Ivan was missing, Tolstoy would not likely kill her. Killing her would mean civil war, with a half-dozen claimants. Tolstoy wanted to be king, but he was merely a baron from a cadet branch of the family; Aria had bastard cousins with far better claims than he had.

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Ambitious upcountry boyars like the d'Medveds would rise up as well — if only to be bought off. Those who stood to profit from chaos were the ones who would kill her outright, but the fact that she was breathing meant she was not in their hands — yet. How ghastly to think that all these men wanted was her womb; that Tolstoy would murder her or make love to her, as needed. It made Aria want to gag. And it made her miss Jochi, who cared for her, not what she could produce. Worried sick about the boy, she had dared not ask after him — the slightest sign of concern from her could easily get someone killed, or at best gruesomely tortured.

As Aria pondered her problems, a wall panel popped out and a dwarf stuck his head into the room, saying, "Thought that huge nasty bigger would never leave." Remembering his manners, the dwarf asked, "Your Highness, have I leave to enter?"

"You have." She recognized Goliath, an especially tiny dwarf, barely two feet tall, but a perfectly formed man in miniature. Haram bred, he was dressed by the women in yellow silk doll clothes, and was small enough to use the tiniest dwarf tunnels — those no "bigger" even knew about.

Stepping like a genie out of the wall, Goliath did a neat salaam, saying, "Please, Your Highness must come with me."

Sitting on her cushion, she still had to look down at Goliath. "If I must, I must," she agreed, "but your tunnel is too tiny for me."

"Worry not, m'lady. You are small for a bigger. We will manage." Goliath produced a high-pitched bone whistle, and blew on it.

Dwarves were prized in Markovy — some would say worshipped. What others called a deformity, Markovites counted a blessing, and any peasant or artisan family having a grown child less than three-foot-six never had to pay taxes again. Dwarves born to serfs and slaves were automatically freed and made dependents of the crown, living at King's expense among people their size, encouraged to find mates and multiply, in hope of raising the dwarf population. Alas, most children of dwarves grew to normal heights — but they too got good marriages or crown jobs, encouraging their parents to try again. Free from protocol, coming and going as they willed, dwarves were the only "intact" males in the Haram. They were often grossly mistreated — drunken boyars had dwarf tossing contests, playing keep-away from the dogs, or just doused dwarves with brandy and set them alight — but dwarves were never punished for not

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being "normal." They did not have to hold jobs, pay taxes, go to chapel, nor even bow to the King. Pipit was a seamstress because she liked to sew, and Goliath had good manners because he was Haram born — none of that was required. Growing up short was all that mattered. Ghastly deaths awaited anyone who maimed normal children to pass off as dwarves, for both mocking Heaven and cheating the King.

An answering whistle sounded above, then a trap opened in the ceiling and a rope dropped down to hang at her side. Neat trick, having her exit drop out of nowhere. Goliath helped put her slippered foot in a loop at the end of the rope, then she held on while he whistled again. Slowly the rope withdrew into the ceiling, pulling her up with it. When she was two or so she used to use the dwarf tunnels all the time — but gradually she outgrew them, getting normal-sized playmates. When she had this room as a young teen she had not known there were tunnels in the wall and ceiling, and she was giving dwarves a peep show whenever she stripped for bed. The opening above was just big enough for her shoulders, and the trap closed behind her as she was lifted into a smooth wooden shaft going straight up, then curving gradually, until she was being hauled along horizontally, her silk dress sliding silently over lacquered wood.

Negotiating several tight curves, she slid through tunnels too narrow for a grown man, and nearly too small for her. Suddenly she came headfirst into a low closet-sized room, lit by an oil lamp and crammed with dwarves, who had used counterweights and a windlass to pull her along. Here she had room to stand, but all the tunnels leading out were at least as small as the one through which she came in. Pipit was there, along with four males who worked the windlass; Squinty, Gnat, Timothy, and Ezekiel. Aria thanked them enthusiastically; to be out of Tolstoy's hands was an amazing relief. She had been sure she would be either married or murdered — maybe both. "Thank you, thank you," she gushed her gratitude. "You have done the crown an inestimable service."

Gnat stepped up, doffing his belled cap, and bowing deep. "We thank m'lady for being so light, and delicately built — few biggers could have slid so easily through our tunnels."

"Beware, m'lady," Pipit warned, "he only wants to look up your dress."

She looked down at the dwarf whose nose was practically in her silk crotch. "Really?"

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"'Fraid so, m'lady," Gnat admitted; being a dwarf, he did not fear punishment and answered honestly. Only dwarves and nobles knew how it felt to be free.

"Ladies let him do it when he was young," Pipit explained. "Now he is sore addicted to it."

"So?" Gnat glared pointedly at Pipit. "There's skirts around here I would not look up, not for a pot o' gold."

Pipit snorted, telling him, "Throw back the trap." Gnat heaved open a trapdoor in the floor, and Pipit motioned to her. "M'lady, this is how you must leave."

Looking down, she saw light at the far end of a deep dark shaft; stepping into another loop of rope, she let them lower her into the heart of the Haram vaults — not the charnel house this time, but into a walled-up stone chamber that could only be reached through dwarf tunnels. As she alighted on the stone floor, she saw the dwarves had turned it into a throne room. Ivan sat on an ornate dinner chair set up against one wall — the only piece of furniture aside from the royal doll bed and chamber pot. He beamed in the lamplight, incredibly happy to see her. "Aria, Aria, this is passing wonderful." Aside from Jochi, Ivan was the only male who consistently called her Aria. "Oh, I so sorely feared you were dead."

"Not quite yet." She knelt before Ivan, feeling silly being the only person over three feet tall. All her life she had been underfoot; suddenly she was a giant. "I did see Death, but just for a visit. What is this place?"

"My throne room," Ivan announced proudly, his feet swinging freely inches above the floor. "Dwarves found it for me. They used to keep Old Queen Ivanovna in here — but that was long ago."

Cranky old Queen Ivanovna II had lost her private prison-crypt, ending up in the charnel house with everyone else. Even the horror of being walled up alive merely led to death, then the ossuary. "I am in charge now, Aria," Ivan told her solemnly, "so you must tell me what to do."

Aria reached out to him. "First give your Princess Regent a royal hug." Ivan hopped off his dining-chair throne into her arms, sobbing with relief, while his dwarf court whistled and stomped. When she was done comforting her prince, she asked the dwarves what was happening in the Haram; it turned out Tolstoy's men were searching desperately for Ivan, from the drains to the attic, much to the dwarves' amusement. Biggers had scant

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hope of ever finding him, the room having been bricked up for almost two centuries, so long no one but the dwarves knew about it.

"And they do not yet know that Your Highness is missing as well," the dwarves added happily. They also said Jochi and her handmaids were alive — but locked away where the dwarves could not get at them.

She asked if any of them knew Lord Valad d'Hay — several did, remembering how he barged handsomely into the Haram on the day Prince Akavarr died. "Find him," she ordered in Ivan's name. "Tell Lord d'Hay I am alive and in hiding; ask him to see if the Kazaks will stay loyal." Her Gendarmes had gone over to Tolstoy, leaving Jochi's people her only potential allies outside the Haram — if the dwarves could get to d'Hay, and d'Hay could get to the Kazaks.

Aria settled down, waiting for good news from d'Hay. From time to time she had herself hauled up to the windlass room, watching the progress of the search through peepholes. Seeing huge men in iron armor clanking about the silken rooms, tripping over cushions and slashing behind hangings with their swords gave her something of the dwarves' contempt for biggers. Not better, not smarter, not nicer — just bigger.

Five days later Tolstoy struck, on a cold dreary morning with a swirl of snow in the air. Dwarves brought word that a breaking wheel and a pair of burning stakes were set up in Temple Square, in front of the Friday Market. Determined to see for herself, Aria wormed her way through dwarf tunnels to a trap that opened above the King's Gallery, the marble balcony where kings of Markovy were proclaimed. Lifting the trap, she looked down on Temple Square two stories below her. Snow dusted the great wooden Temple of Baldar the Good on the east side of the square, facing All Saints' Cathedral. Across from her on the north side of the square stood the Friday Market, a stone arcade of shops, inns, and public baths facing the Haram-Palace. Like the dwarves had said, the square was set for executions, with a breaking wheel, two burning stakes, and a great pile of brushwood.

Ominous. Aria said a swift prayer to Death, whose day this clearly was. Her boyars had built a gruesome altar to Lady Death in Temple Square, lacking only the victims. "Dark Lady, I have given myself up to you — if this is my day to die, so be it. Please send Persephone for me. But

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I beg you to spare those whose only crime is to love me. May you dwell forever in darkness. Amen."

Sensing a crisis coming, she sent for Ivan, and dwarves brought their little prince to where Aria waited atop the trapdoor. By then there were people assembling, spilling out of the Friday Market which was already open for business — nothing brought out Markovites like a multiple execution. Baker's boys started hawking meat pies to the growing crowd. Then came the blare of trumpets, and she saw Tolstoy and his guards file out of the palace gate, leading a trio of prisoners — Jochi, Sonya, and Tasha. Anna Tolstoy was conspicuously absent.

Aria watched in helpless anguish as Jochi was bound to the breaking wheel, wearing only a loincloth and his broken balalaika hanging around his neck. Tolstoy's herald read off the charges, including treason, heresy, having illegal and unnatural relations with Princess Aria, and possessing a musical instrument. Tasha and Sonya were led to the burning stakes, both accused of witchcraft. Only accused, since Tolstoy made no pretense of holding trials. Boyar law allowed lords to juggle the order of justice, and sentences could be carried out before conviction, or appeal. But this was not a real legal triple execution — this was a message to the Haram, and to Aria most particularly.

And it worked. Tolstoy had found a way to hurt her, even in hiding. Horrified, Aria saw her former guard captain turn her two handmaids over to Tolstoy's executioner — a big muscled brute called Magog, famous for his skill and cruelty, who could flay a man to the spine with a single blow of the knout. Or lightly carve his single initial with a whip. As Magog bound her to the stake, Sonya d'Medved shouted a vulgar insult at the guard captain — the girl had a blue bruise on her chin from when he had hit her. Looking at his former lover, he lifted an eyebrow. "Having fun, Sonya?"

"More than with you." Sonya laughed at him as serfs piled wood at her feet. "I've known eunuchs with more manhood."

"You have known your last eunuch, Sonya." He nodded toward the nearby altar topped by flint and tinder. "In a few minutes I will kindle your fire with my own hands."

"Finally found a way to warm a woman?" Sonya smirked. "Too bad it cannot be in bed."

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Sonya's guard captain lover was at a serious disadvantage, being mocked by a pretty girl half his size, tied to a stake and about to die. He could not help but look silly. Hitting her had not helped, since the bruise on her chin only made Sonya more mouthy, daring him to do it again now that her hands were tied. Which got the crowd on Sonya's side, cheering her retorts with cries of, "Good for you, girl," and, "Sass 'em, Sonya," mixed with the odd call to, "Burn the bitch!" Jochi and Tasha were mere nomads; people had poured into Temple Square to see how a d'Medved died, and Sonya did not mean to disappoint her public.

Chanting rose up to drown out the catcalls as Bishop Peter emerged from All Souls' Cathedral in full regalia, followed by deacons, archpriests, acolytes, nuns, cantors, and singing choirboys dressed in white and trimmed with cloth-of-gold — a noisy glittering procession that parted the crowd, preceded by chanting curates swinging smoking censers. Backed by his white-robed flock, the Patriarch of Markovy marched straight up to Baron Tolstoy, who sat on horseback to be above the crowd. Supported by his silver crook, Bishop planted himself directly in the mounted nobleman's path, saying, "Cease and desist. What you do here goes against Heaven."

"Really?" Tolstoy sneered, "I thought sodomy, witchcraft, and stringed instruments went against Heaven. We are just carrying out the Almighty's will."

Old Bishop Peter shook his silver shepherd's crook at the presumptuous boyar, shouting, "Blasphemous sinner, Mother Church must judge these crimes. You have no right to say what Heaven wills. Satan has hold of your soul, and you stand on the very edge of the pit; step back now or vile death shall take you."

Tolstoy looked wholly taken aback, shocked by the Patriarch's vehemence. The surprised boyar did not know the beautiful boy tied to the breaking wheel had been the old bishop's bedmate — that the white graceful limbs Magog was about to smash had often been locked about the Patriarch of Markov. "Beware, old priest," Tolstoy warned, "meddle not in men's business."

Tolstoy would not stop for Bishop Peter, so Aria had to act. She could not crouch in darkness, watching Jochi broken apart while Tasha and Sonya were burned alive. Swinging her legs through the trapdoor, she let herself down into the shadows at the back of the balcony, while everyone's

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gaze was riveted on the stand-off between the boyar and the bishop. Now she would see if her submission to death was real. Whispering up to the dwarves, she had them hand Ivan down to her. He clung hard to her, asking, "What is happening, Aria?"

"Nothing bad," she hoped, her heart beating like a hare's. "We are just going to make an appearance — be a king." Ivan nodded solemnly, his royal gaze fixed on her. Saying a short prayer to Lady Death and to her sister Persephone, Killer of Children and Maidens, Aria stepped up to the balcony rail, shouting, "Cease, in the name of Prince Ivan."

"Yes! Cease," squeaked Ivan, "in my name."

Cheers erupted from the crowd, ecstatic at seeing their missing prince suddenly appear alive and unharmed on the King's Gallery. Aria saw Tolstoy retainers rush for the Red Stairs with misdirected enthusiasm — dwarves had locked and bolted the heavy doors leading to the gallery. Looking up in anger, Tolstoy called for her to come down. "And bring Prince Ivan with you."

Aria ignored his demand, seeing a winged shadow sweep across the upturned faces of the crowd, a gray feathery shape she recognized at once. People cried out in frightened wonder, "Dear Heaven! Look, it's Death's Shadow!"

Tolstoy alone seemed immune to the miracle, still calling to her, "Come down at once."

She watched the shadow sweep by a second time, gliding over the sea of upturned faces, like the gray cast that moves slowly over the visage of the dying. She called out to the crowd, "Cease now. Return to your homes." But the mass of common Markovites stood rooted in the square, stunned by the miracle they were witnessing.

Annoyed with everyone's inaction, Tolstoy told his guard captain, "Kindle the fire." Which the captain did, lighting a pine knot torch. "Will you come down now?" Tolstoy demanded. When she did not answer, Tolstoy turned to the guard captain, saying, "Immolate one of the women."

Striding over to where Sonya waited, the guard captain held up the lit torch for the bound girl to see, letting her feel the heat. He grinned as the shadow swept past a third time, saying, "Here, honey, I will always remember you fondly...."

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As he spoke, a silver shaft struck him from above, a shining arrow that seemed to sprout suddenly from the back of his neck. Crumpling forward silently, he dropped his torch, falling in an armored heap at Sonya's bound feet. Looking down at him, the boyar's daughter laughed, saying, "Sorry I cannot say the same."

Wings beat the air, and a huge woman-carrying roc landed beside the burning stakes. Persephone sat on the bird's back, her silver moon bow in hand — people shrank back, glad to give her room. Tolstoy stood staring in astonishment, unable to believe his seemingly simple plan could have gone so utterly wrong. Death's little sister looked levelly at Magog, who had picked up the captain's fallen torch. "You trespass on my domain, I am Persephone, the Killer of Children and Maidens."

Looking about anxiously, Magog saw he was facing Death's sister alone. He lowered the torch, protesting, "They are not maidens, m'lady."

"Why?" Persephone asked. "Because you raped them?" Markovites thought it unlucky to execute a virgin, and it was the executioner's duty to see that did not happen. "Do not think a man may unmake a maid so easily."

Looking anguished, Tolstoy's executioner asked, "M'lady, if I have somehow offended...."

Persephone raised a hand. "You have trespassed on my domain, and now you must enter it completely. Have you any preference how?" Persephone nodded at the prone captain, saying, "That is paralysis; he is not even dead yet."

Magog did not answer, watching in terror as Persephone flipped idly through the arrows in her quiver. "Plague? Too slow. Heart failure? Too swift. Stroke? Perfect, don't you think? Gives you time to remember your sins." Settling on the stroke arrow, she shot the horrified executioner with it, saying, "Welcome to our kingdom."

Aria was struck by the arbitrariness of death, having thought Persephone was coming to take her. Startled gasps from the crowd were followed by wild shouts of approval and a ragged cheer. Tolstoy's executioner had made enemies in his successful career of cheerfully killing and torturing in public — even condemned criminals had friends and family. Angered, Tolstoy ordered his shamefaced retainers to quiet the crowd, but they had only indifferent success. Boyars ruled through fear, lording over

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unarmed people, but Aria could see Tolstoy's control slipping. His most feared servant had been shot down by a blonde demi-god on a big bird, who continued to defy him.

Persephone told the angry boyar, "I am the Killer of Children, and Prince Ivan is under my authority — his life and death lie in my hands."

"How dare you?" Tolstoy demanded. "A heathen demon with blood on her hands has no rights to our prince royal."

"Really?" Persephone arched a blonde eyebrow as she rummaged through her quiver. "What death do you desire?"

"Stop her," Tolstoy shouted to his men — but not a single retainer moved to get between him and Persephone's deadly arrows.

Only Bishop Peter dared step forward, waving his silver crosier at the beleaguered baron, then pointing it at Persephone. "Death hangs over you," the Patriarch declared. "You have threatened the crown, denied Heaven, and invited in Death. Heed this last warning before it is too late...."

As if on cue, Aria saw armed men pour out of the great wooden temple to Baldar the Good. Kazaks with heavy armor-piercing bows eagerly took up firing positions from which they could sweep the square. Among them were Markovites in armor, men-at-arms wearing a little yellow badge shaped like a bird — the d'Medved golden martlet. At their head was a knight wearing Aria's own silver and black — she recognized young Lord Valad d'Hay, her new guard commander. Caught between priests, populace, and armor-piercing arrows, boyars began to waver. Aria almost felt sorry for Tolstoy, seeing how he had unwittingly taken on the Church, Death, dwarves, and now the d'Medveds and Kazaks — when all he wanted to do was steal Ivan from the Haram, a seemingly simple task that had him hopelessly beaten and hanging by a thread.

Lifting Ivan higher to show for whom she spoke, Aria told him, "Throw down your arms and submit. Only that will save you." She had submitted to Death, and it certainly saved her — now it was Tolstoy's turn.

"Yes," Ivan added shrilly, emboldened by his sister's defiance. "Submit!"

Markovites packed into Temple Square took up their crown prince's demand, turning it into a chant, "Submit, submit, submit...." Voices rolled back through the crowd like a wave, growing in volume. All their

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lives disarmed Markovites had lived in fear of the boyars and their overarmed retainers. Seeing that Death's sister and the horde of heathen Kazaks meant them no harm — that ordinary Markovites were immune while the boyars were not — lifted people's lifelong fear, replacing it with anger at what they had endured. Surging forward, the crowd called out even louder, shouting, "Submit! Submit! Submit...."

One by one the boyars did, bowing and dropping their weapons onto the ground, then going down on their knees before the child on the King's Gallery. Tolstoy too gave in, sinking to his knees in surrender, drawing an ironic cheer from the joyous crowd. Aria was jubilant, her feeling of doom lifted. Death had passed her by, even though she offered herself freely. But who was she to question a demi-god? She told the dwarves above her to find Sister Karinana, knowing Ivan's mother must be worried for her son.

Backed by the Kazaks and d'Medveds, young d'Hay moved among the boyars below, taking away their weapons and tossing them into a heap beneath the King's Gallery. Last of all he took Tolstoy's sword, adding it to the growing pile of cutlery — making the Kazaks the largest armed force left, but they were dismounted and separated from the steppe, and not at all likely to run wild. What they wanted was more respect and suitable rewards — both of which they were going to get. Like her Kazak had said, treat a mare well when she's young, "and when she is grown she's yours, and her foals and stallion will follow."

Freeing Tolstoy's prisoners, d'Hay brought them over to stand before the King's Gallery, Jochi in just his loincloth, the girls in their burning smocks. Jochi gave her a lopsided grin, which Aria struggled not to return, knowing personal celebration would have to wait. She was a maiden princess who must be chaste in public.

D'Hay did a rattling armored bow, immensely pleased by his performance. "Please forgive me, Your Highness. In the absence of orders I was forced to improvise. Since Kazaks and d'Medveds are blood enemies, I had to show them their common interest, taking the liberty of promising lavish rewards from the crown."

"Well done," Aria applauded his initiative. Whatever price deliverance had cost would be paid — out of Baron Tolstoy's estates. "And nothing for yourself?"

"Only the honor of serving you," d'Hay replied proudly, dropping to one knee. Her gaze met Sonya d'Medved's, and the blonde girl smirked

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behind d'Hay's back — seeing another bold assertive guard captain begging to serve his mistress. Hopefully he would do better than the last.

Looking back down at d'Hay, Aria decided he was indeed handsome, kneeling in his shining armor before the gleaming pile of edged steel — a heap of weapons that would no longer be used against her. Not the total answer to her prayers, but it was a beginning. She bid young Lord d'Hay rise, saying, "This is an honor you have well earned."

With a flutter of great wings, Death's little sister flew off, rising into the cold bright sky on her huge roc, with her silver bow and poisoned quiver slung across her back. Pretty blonde Persephone, the Killer of Children and Maidens, had much to keep her busy, and could ill afford to linger where there was no more killing to be done. Markovites cheered in happy relief, hoping she would never return.

Coming Attractions

THAT COVER PAINTING for M. Rickert's "Leda" has indeed been rescued from the museum where it hung...but then it was shipped by The Nairobi Trio courier service and, well, suffice it to say it's on the way.

Also on the way are:

"Mr. Gaunt," a delicious dark fantasy by John Langan, author of "On Skua Island."

"The Synchronous Swimmer," Harvey Jacobs's offbeat look at the wide worlds of sports.

"Bronte's Egg," a novella concerning the loveable saurs first encountered in Richard Chwedyk's "The Measure of All Things."

And fancies and wonders from the likes of Robert Reed, Jack Cady, Bruce Sterling, and Ron Goulart.

The October double issue is only three months away. In addition to a new story by Damon Knight, it looks as though we'll have a short piece by Ursula K. Le Guin to present to you.

Speaking of coming attractions, there's still time to fill out our reader survey and let us know what you'd like to see in the future—go to *www.fsfmag.com* and follow the link there. One lucky person will win a lifetime subscription for filling out the survey; everyone else should take advantage of our current rates before postal increases force them up.

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CURIOSITIES

I AM THINKING OF MY DARLING, BY VINCENT MCHUGH (1943)

WHEN THE Mayor of New York announces his resignation in order to have more time to play with his model trains, his staff is finally forced to acknowledge that the epidemic underway has reached an advanced stage.

In McHugh's scientifically, politically, and psychologically convincing account of several weeks when Manhattan and her sister boroughs are besieged by a South American virus that releases the inhibitions of its victims, we encounter a bridging work between Thorne Smith's Prohibition-fueled comedies and the dropout road novels of Kerouac. Neither as silly as the former nor as sober as the latter, Darling builds a strong case for a nascent hippie credo, before finally settling with wistful regret on the side of law and order, presciently rehearsing the actual tumult of the Sixties and Seventies.

Jim Rowan, our narrator and a pivotal mayoral assistant, arrives back in town from Washington and is immediately swept up in the chaos of a city gone arcadian. His wife, Niobe, has succumbed to the virus and become a ringleader among the free-love anarchists. Striving to manage his city and search for his wife simultaneously, Jim nonetheless finds time for several affairs of his own, finally catching the virus himself, but still clinging to his duties.

McHugh's jazzy book scats like an Andrews Sisters ditty, recalling the hepcat stylings of Bester and, at times, the "competent man" philosophizing of Heinlein. McHugh (1904-1983) wrote other novels, including one about an immortal man, but this one is infectious.

—Paul Di Filippo

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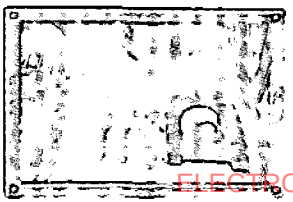

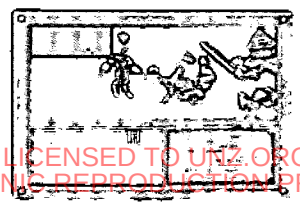

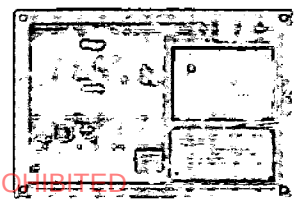

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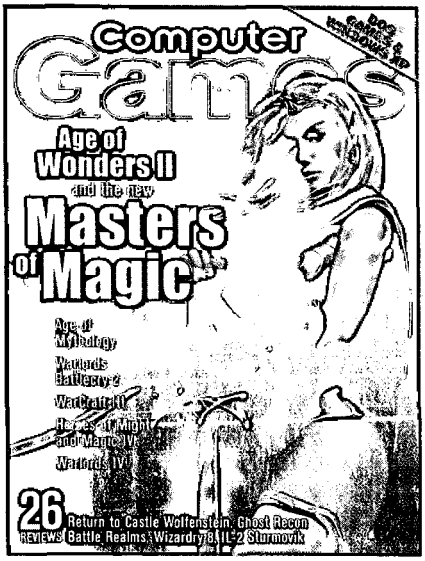

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